cautious steps

By: rumiberri

because life taught her not to be so naive, so naturally, it would take her longer to fall (in love) [AU][No Magic][Sequel to 10 steps]

Rated: Fiction T - English - [Madoka K., Homura A.] - Chapters: 3 - Words: 18,008 - Reviews: 32 - Favs: 21 - Follows: 30 - Updated: Apr 28 - Published: Apr 13 - id: 10265272

Chapter 1

It starts with a phone call.

Loud music, intermittent buzzes; a steady beat to a popular pop song.

A figure sits up slowly, dark hair a tangled mess and pajamas ruffled from sleep. She squints her eyes in the direction of the white glow, the screen on the phone the only light visible in the room.

Just as sudden, everything stops, and the jarring silence is a sharp contrast to the earlier noise.

She's about to fall back onto her futon when the phone rings once again. Her irritated sigh is drowned out by the grating ringtone.

She pushes her blankets away and stands. She finds she is too lazy to turn on the light, thoughts still clinging to sleep, and all but stomps over to offending device in the dark.

She immediately regrets her decision as sudden pain shoots up her foot: a miscalculation and a stubbed toe on the bed frame in the middle of the room.

She bites back a cry of pain and moves over to avoid anymore mishaps. Using the phone as a guide, she steps around the bed and is halfway there when it stops, suddenly falling back into silence.

She pauses, waiting to see if that's the end, when music answers that question for her.

The path now between her and the phone is straight ahead. She quickly strides over, intent on maybe throwing the thing out the window.

A few more steps and she reaches for it just as her foot catches on something that shouldn't be on the floor. She stumbles forward, slamming hard onto the wooden dresser and there's a loud crash as it hits the wall.

"Ow..."

The phone is quiet as she leans heavily on the dresser, bruised arms throbbing from her spill.

As if adding insult to her injury, it suddenly rings once more, right into her ear.

"Ugh."

She quickly reaches for it, eyes automatically squinting at the brightness and due to her own nearsightedness. A glance at the name on the screen, another sigh with just as much irritation laced in. She uses the phone like a flashlight to locate where the bed begins, and where the sleeping figure on it lies.

She walks over and grasps the figure's shoulder.

She shakes her lightly. "Madoka. Madoka, wake up."

No response.

She tries, harder this time, as the phone reminds her why she's standing here instead of sleeping.

"Madoka. Madoka, someone's calling you. Madoka."

"Nngh..."

She hears shifting as the shoulder pulls away; Madoka merely turning in her sleep.

She holds out the phone, hoping that the loud noise will wake her up instead.

No such luck.

Another quick shine on the bed and she places a knee onto the mattress. She leans in closer before she lowers her hand on Madoka's shoulder once more.

"Madoka? Madoka."

"...Hmm...?" a sleepy voice finally greets her.

"Madoka, there's a phone call. For you."

"...Homura-chan...?"

Homura refrains from sighing again. "Madoka, your phone."

"...Hmm? Did you... have another nightmare... Homura-chan...?"

"No—"

She hears rustling and the bed moves slightly. "...there... you can sleep... on that side...goodnight, Homura-chan..."

"Mado—" Homura grits her teeth at the annoying ringtone. "I'm going to pick up, okay, Madoka?"

"...mm..."

Taking that as a yes, Homura jabs the receive button on the screen and places the phone to her ear.

"Madoka? Geez, you're still a heavy sleeper, aren't you? Hey, uhm—"

"Miki Sayaka. Is this a life or death situation?"

"H-Homura? Is that—"

"If I hang up right now, will you die?"

"Uhh, where's—"

"Is that a no, Miki Sayaka? Because it is..." Homura has no idea what time it is, "...too early for you to be calling at this time."

"Where's—"

"Goodnight, Miki Sayaka."

"Wait wait wait! Yes, it's a life or death situation!"

Homura pauses, weighing her options. She decides Madoka would be upset if Sayaka died and sighs.

"You have 30 seconds. Explain."

"Uh..."

"25...24..."

"O-Okay! Geez. Long story short, I took the last train to Tokyo but I forgot to reload my credits on my phone so I don't have enough money to pay for the bus fare to get to your place."

"..."

"Homura? You there?"

"...It's only 500yen. How do you not have enough?"

"Uh... well, there was this sale earlier..."

She does not reply. Instead, she raises her free hand to her forehead and tries to massage the forming headache away.

"Hello? Homura? She didn't hang up on me, did she? Hey!"

"...Take a taxi."

"There's the insurance fee. I don't have enough to cover that."

"...How do you not have a waiver for that?"

"Uh... I kind of forgot to pay for it... I don't really use taxis at home, so I kind of forgot it..."

"...Take the uninsured line."

"It's twice as expensive!"

"...Why do I get the feeling you are merely making excuses?"

"..."

"If—"

"Homura... I just—really want to see Madoka right now, alright? Can...can you get her to pick me up? ...*Please*. "

She sighs. "...You are still at the station?"

"Yeah."

"There's a small bar by the station entrance, it's not hard to miss. It'll be one of the only open shops there with a large yellow sign. Go there and wait."

"W-Wha—"

"It is not safe to stay at the station during this time; there has been an increase in crime in the area recently. Walk over there, now, and stay on the line with me until you get there. Are you moving, Miki Sayaka?"

"Uh...Y-Yeah, lemme get my bag..."

Homura can hear rustling in the background.

"O-Okay. By the entrance, you said?"

"Yes. It'll be on your right."

"On my right... okay."

"Mmhmm..."

"Is, uh... Madoka still sleeping?"

"...Do you even need to ask?"

Homura hears Sayaka laugh quietly. "Yeah... she's always been like that, even when we were younger. It's amazing she can wake up in the morning for classes."

Thoughts of Sayaka's earlier visits. "Hm... the same can be said of you as well."

Sayaka scoffs. "Whatev—Oh, yellow sign, right? Tetsuno?"

"Yes. You are underage, but tell them you are merely there to wait for a friend. They won't kick you out."

"Huh." Homura can hear the unasked question in her voice. "Alright."

"Have you arrived?"

"Yeah." More rustling, the sound of a bell and a low muffled voice is heard.

Sayaka's barely audible reply.

More indistinguishable words.

Her voice returns to normal volume. "Yeah, they said I can stay. Uhm. How long until you get here?"

Homura closes her eyes. "Depends on how hard it is to wake her up. 45 minutes, including travel time. Maybe."

"...alright, good luck."

"Yes."

"Uh... Homura?"

She's in the midst of hanging up and places the phone back to her ear. "Yes?"

"Uhm. Thanks."

"...You're welcome. We will be there soon."

"'Kay. Bye."

Click.

Homura turns to where she knows Madoka is sleeping and sighs once more.

Maybe she should've told her an hour... or two.

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As Sayaka makes herself comfortable on one of the bar stools, she can't help but look around. Tetsuno is empty, small, and above all else, old. The worn bar counter sits only five people, and makes up almost half of the room. There's two more small tables to the side, a bulky looking TV hanging on the corner of the far wall, and the peeling paint surrounding it makes Sayaka worry about its stability. There's also a large, black boxed object directly below that. Maybe a karaoke machine, considering the microphones lying on top.

"Anything to drink?"

Sayaka turns to regard the bartender, eyes already comparing him to someone else. Dress shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows, black tie matching his black slacks. Dark spiky hair and dark brown eyes. A dashing smile.

He looks nothing like *him* and she relaxes slightly.

He winks at her.

"Like what you see?" His voice is a light and teasing.

She rolls her eyes. "Maybe. But maybe I've seen better."

He grabs his chest and winces. "Ouch, you've got a sharp tongue, eh?"

Friendly banter between two strangers.

"Water, for now, please."

"Sure." He pulls out a clean glass from under the counter and sets that down in front of her. "Ice?"

"Yes, please."

A pitcher fills her glass; the tinkling sound of water and shifting ice cubes fills the room.

"Thank you."

He slides a faded paper over. "We have a full functioning kitchen, in case you are hungry. I recommend the curry; it's today's special."

Her eyes scan the menu and she finds the item listed at the bottom. "'Day old curry?'"

He grins. "The best kind."

"Hmm." She is feeling a bit peckish, though thoughts of why she's even here makes her stomach churn. Not to mention she's a bit wary of their health standards. "Maybe something lighter."

"Bar snacks." His voice is knowing as he points to the top of the menu. "Or," her eyes follow as his hand flips the paper over, "desserts! A girl's best friend!"

"Not diamonds?" but his statement makes her smile for some reason.

He snaps his fingers and she looks up to see him grinning at her. "See, I knew you had a nice smile. A cute girl like you, should remain smiling like that, always."

Beyond friendly; he's downright flirting.

She doesn't mind and her self confidence repairs itself, ever so slightly; if only it was someone else telling her this.

A familiar face flashes in her mind and her smile falters.

"Ahh, there it is again." A finger is waggled in front her face. "Nope, no moping here, not while I'm working. I'll be right back."

She watches as he disappears into the opening behind him, most likely leading to the kitchen. It's quiet enough that she can hear dishes, cabinets being opened and closed and voices exchanged.

He returns and sets down a full bowl of edamame, placing an empty bowl besides that.

"Something light and refreshing for the little lady."

She stares at him and he grins.

"It's on the house." Sensing her hesitation, he leans in almost conspiratorially. "It's really to bring up your appetite. It'll make you hungry and then you'll want to order something else."

She shakes her head even as her lips twitch with amusement. She turns to the edamame and eyes it critically; it looks normal. She reaches for one and uses her fingers to press on the pod, popping three green beans into her mouth.

Lightly salted and cool against her tongue; for some reason, it makes her feel better. Maybe it's because she hasn't eaten all day.

"So." She looks up as her fingers discard the pod into the empty bowl. "I'm a pretty good listener. Wanna talk about it?"

His outright bluntness should make her annoyed, but it doesn't.

"What makes you think something's the matter?" She leans back with a raised eyebrow.

He mirrors her, raising his own. "It's 3am. Saturday. You should be out, partying with friends or cuddling with your boyfriend. Instead you're here, in this dumpy old bar that caters to lonely drunks or office workers who maybe missed their last train back home. Considering the heavy duffel I saw you lugging in, I think you voluntarily came here on your own. Maybe to run away from something."

She sighs, shoulders suddenly heavy as she remembers her situation.

"Come on." He takes an edamame and eats one. "See? We're sharing food. We're friends already."

Her eyes roll but there's a smile on her lips. "Geez, you are insufferable."

He winks.

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As soon as the taxi is parked and the door is opened, Madoka steps out with Homura following after her.

"I'll wait out here."

Madoka blinks, but the meter is still running and thinks nothing more of it.

"Okay."

She pulls open the glass door and as a bell rings, she's instantly reminded of a place now close to her heart.

"Welcome! Ahh, another pretty lady. Let me guess, you are her friend?"

Madoka nods as the bartender gestures to the figure sitting at the bar. Even if she didn't have that distinguishable shade of blue hair, Madoka easily recognizes the jacket she's wearing that's emblazoned with the words 'Mitakihara High' on them. Coupled with her usual jeans and brightly coloured sneakers, Sayaka looks exactly the same as when she had seen her a couple months prior.

"Yo, Madoka!" A hand held high in greeting.

"Sayaka-chan." She is glad to see her, but she knows there's a reason she's in Tokyo instead of at home. "Uhm. The taxi is waiting."

"Ahh..." Sayaka sheepishly scratches her head. "Actually, I wasn't sure how long until you'd be here, so I kind of put in an order for curry..."

"It's almost ready!" the bartender throws in helpfully.

Madoka blinks. "...Alright. Let me go tell Homura-chan. I'll be right back."

The door closes after her and Sayaka turns back to the bartender who suddenly has a serious look on his face.

"Homura?"

"Hm?" Sayaka raises a curious eyebrow.

A disarming smile. "Nothing. I'll be right back, gotta check on the curry."

He leaves her alone and Sayaka rests her hands on the counter as she waits for Madoka to return.

It takes a few more minutes than expected. When there's that familiar ring, Sayaka turns and sees Madoka dragging in a reluctant looking Homura, which she finds strange.

Homura had been the one to suggest this place, after all.

The door shuts with a light jangle and they both walk to join Sayaka.

Madoka takes a seat besides her, but Homura remains standing.

"Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka hums and turns to Madoka with a smile. She notes that Madoka still looks sleepy and that her hair is down and messier than usual. Dressed in shorts, a pink hoodie, and socks slipped into a pair of sneakers, just the familiar sight of her makes Sayaka want to cry.

"...I wanted to see you. Sorry, for waking you up." Sayaka glances over to Homura who is dressed just as lightly, except with capri pants and her sweater is grey. A glance down and Sayaka can see her boot clad feet tapping on the floor impatiently. "You too, Homura. Sorry."

Homura shrugs while Madoka looks at Sayaka, eyes searching her face in worry. "...No, it's fine. Sorry I didn't pick up."

They share a smile.

Sayaka slides the menu over to Madoka. "You can order something, if you'd like? Oh. Uhm... You have enough to cover the curry too, right?"

Madoka nods. "Yes, of course."

"I'll definitely pay you back when I get home!" Sayaka promises.

"That's fine," Madoka murmurs, eyes glossing over the selection. "Homura-chan?"

Homura jumps at being addressed. "H-Hm?"

Both of them eye her strangely.

"Are you alright?" Madoka asks, finally noticing how nervous she seems.

"Yes."

A short and simple answer that Madoka is starting to recognize to mean 'No.'

"Are—"

"Here you go, one day old cur—"

They all turn as the bartender reappears with a bowl in his hands.

And watch as his head snaps towards Homura who glances at him warily.

"Uh, Satoshi-san?" Sayaka stares at him and he turns to her with a smile.

"Here you go, one day old curry." He places the curry calmly in front of her, a spoon and napkin placed besides that.

As soon as that is done, the smile slides off his face as he faces Homura.

"You. Where the hell have you been?!"

Homura flinches, immediately stepping back as he pops open the counter to reach her.

Madoka moves to stand, Sayaka following her example, but they both freeze when he merely throws his arms around Homura and hugs her tightly.

"Geez! You—no phone call, no mail! Nothing from you! For three whole months! I stopped by your place—and your roommates told me you moved out!"

Homura struggles to breath and unsuccessfully tries to push him away. She's this close to stepping on his foot when he finally pulls back and places his hands on her cheeks.

"You've lost weight. Have you been eating? Where are you living now? Is everything alright?"

She frowns and slaps his hands away. "I am fine. Stop that."

He eyes her curiously. Her face is flushed and he glances to the side. "They're your friends?"

She doesn't reply and he finally notices that the other two in the room are now staring at him like he's some kind of weirdo.

He grins and ropes his arm around Homura's thin shoulders. "No worries, ladies. This is my baby sister. Who," he glares at her, "likes to disappear for months without telling her family where she is."

Homura shrugs helplessly and Madoka can only blink at her.

Her expectations of Homura's family being... not so nice vanish as she evaluates his friendly grin.

"Ah. Uhm, nice to meet you," Madoka murmurs, eyes searching to see if there's any family resemblance; there isn't. "I'm Kaname Madoka."

"Hikaru Satoshi."

Madoka blinks at his name.

Homura pushes him away and he sighs.

"Stop being so shy, Homu-chan."

There's a cough as Sayaka tries to hide her snicker.

Homura grits her teeth. "Do not call me that."

"Homu Homu~" he repeats with a grin.

"...I will wait outside." She moves to turn away and he grabs her shoulders. He's stronger than her and merely navigates her to the seat next to Madoka.

"Sit." She resists but he manages to push her down onto the stool. "You look like you could eat something. I'll be right back with more curry." He turns to Madoka. "Make sure she stays here, okay, Madoka-chan?" He winks at her and Madoka blushes.

"U-Uhm. A-Alright..."

He points at Homura, giving her another glare before he heads off to the kitchen.

Homura sighs and places her elbows on the counter. She links her hands and rests her forehead on them, seeming real tired all of a sudden.

"...I didn't know your brother worked here, Homura-chan."

Homura moves her head slightly and a lone lavender eye peers at Madoka who looks... she's not quite sure. Hurt, maybe?

"...He's not my real brother."

Satoshi storms out from the kitchen, this time with both his hands full of curry bowls which he balances with precision.

"We are siblings," he reaffirms, almost vehemently.

Homura merely sits up and removes her arms from the bar as a hearty bowl is placed in front of her. "*Half*."

"Details, details," he waves her off. "Anyways, these meals are on me. Eat up!"

"Satoshi—"

"Homura."

A pause, glares, and finally her hand reaches for the spoon.

Satoshi smiles, and turns to Sayaka and Madoka. "Eat up! It tastes best when it's still hot."

"Uhm..." Madoka glances at Homura who is eating, albeit grudgingly, and nods. "A-Alright. T-Thank you, uhm. Hikaru-san..."

"Satoshi is fine!"

"Uhm... S-Satoshi-san..."

He nods and gestures for them to try the curry.

"It's pretty good, right?" He looks around for confirmation.

"Y-Yeah," Sayaka agrees; the atmosphere is weird but the curry is definitely good. "Probably one of the best I've tasted."

Satoshi's eyes seem to light up at the praise. "Thank you. I put a lot of work into developing that recipe to perfection. It's good, right, Homu-chan?"

She ignores him, eyes staring into her curry as she pushes random vegetables around; she's not really hungry and would rather go back to sleep.

"Right, Homu-chan?"

She bites back an exasperated sigh and finally looks at him. "So you are still studying culinary?"

He grins and nods. "Yeah. I wouldn't throw that away that easily."

"Mmhmm..." her eyes return to her bowl.

A hand is shoved in front of her face and she jumps in surprise.

"Give me your phone," he tells her and at the same time, starts rummaging behind the counter for something. A few seconds later, a piece of paper is on the counter, along with a pen. "And write down your new address."

"...It is no business of yours where I am living," she grumbles as she pulls out her phone from her pocket.

He accepts it and stares at her. "Are you on the streets?"

"No."

"So you have a place to live."

"Yes."

"How are you paying for it?"

"...I have a job."

He leans against the counter, eyes narrowed at her. "...You aren't selling your body, are you?"

Their bowls rattle as her hand slams down hard on his.

"Ouch!"

"Stop asking stupid questions."

Madoka and Sayaka can only stare as they see a new side of Homura.

"I just wanted to make sure." He turns to regard Sayaka and Madoka. "She's so socially awkward, you know? You two must be angels, considering how she usually treats people." He holds up his red hand as an example.

Sayaka grins but Madoka frowns.

"...if you're done with my phone, give it back."

Satoshi turns back to Homura and pulls out his own phone from his shirt pocket. She assumed he was merely going to check her phone number and immediately stands to retrieve it.

"Nope!" he steps back, away from her reach, and starts punching a few buttons on his phone. He then holds his screen to hers.

Homura is eying the bar, wondering if she's able to clear the height when there's a soft ping and she sighs in defeat.

"There. That should help cover things for a few months." He hands her back her phone and she frowns at him. "...It's your fair share, Homu-chan."

Her lips press into a thin line. She snatches back her phone and stuffs it into her sweater pocket.

Satoshi turns to Madoka and Sayaka who quickly pretend like they hadn't been watching. "So, how did you two meet Homu-chan?"

Madoka blushes as she remembers how they first met. She lowers her spoon and wipes her mouth with the napkin. "Uhm. Homura-chan and I ran into each other at a local coffee shop..."

Literally.

His eyes widen. "She spoke to you, voluntarily?"

"Uhm..." Madoka fidgets with the spoon. "W-Well... I kind of... literally ran into her. And spilled my coffee all over her..."

He bursts out laughing. "I wish I could've seen that!"

"Me too," Sayaka chimes in from the side.

"And she didn't bite your head off?" Satoshi looks at Madoka curiously.

She shakes her head. "N-No. She... offered me some hot cocoa. And uhm, offered to help me do my laundry..."

He turns to Homura and she can already imagine what's running through his head.

The counter rattles, he screams in pain, and her own hand throbs from her actions.

She ignores it.

"Stop bothering her."

"You!" He rubs his hand and steps back. "What happened to the cute little Homu-chan that used to stick so close to me?"

Her eyes narrow. "I never did that. Stop making up lies."

"Alright, already. Sheesh. Anyways," he turns back to Madoka and Sayaka. "I'm glad it seems that Homu-chan finally found some friends. And such cute ones, at that!" He winks at them and Madoka colours as expected.

"...I see you are still a flirt," Homura comments dryly.

"Aw, don't be jealous, Homu-chan. I love you too."

"...why don't you come closer and say that."

"Youch! Scary!"

\\

Arms now laden with leftovers, Homura follows after Madoka and Sayaka as they exit the bar. A hand clasps her shoulder and she stiffens.

"Don't disappear on me again."

She glances back at him. "...I'm doing fine on my own."

He smiles almost bitterly. "Yeah. I guess you are, Homu-chan. Come visit—I work the daytime shift midweek. There's different specials everyday."

She remains quiet and he knows that's her way of rejection.

It makes him annoyed, more at his family than at her. He places his hand on her head, absently noting she hasn't grown much and he's a good head taller than her now. Lack of nutrients, perhaps?

"Please."

The plead in his voice makes her look back at him; he wonders when those lavender eyes stopped shining so brightly.

Then again, if he thinks about it, he's never really seen anything but pain, and then later on, anger, in them either.

"...Maybe."

It's more than expected and he grins.

"I'm glad you finally found someone who understands you, Homu-chan."

"You... have too much free time. You need a girlfriend."

"Hm." He sounds almost thoughtful and she turns around to see him watching Madoka and Sayaka. "Madoka-chan is pretty cute. Think she'd like someone like me?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe you should ask her." She moves to join them and he grabs her wrist.

"Seriously. She's totally my type."

Homura sighs. "From what I remember, any girl is your type." She shakes off his hand. "She's still here, you can ask her yourself."

He eyes her curiously. "You won't mind?"

"...What?"

"...I might end up taking her away from you."

Homura turns to him, eyebrow quirked. "Madoka isn't mine."

"...You still have much to learn, baby sister." He reaches up and ruffles her hair.

Hands full, Homura kicks him in the shin and he winces. "Ouch! Are you regressing back to your high school days?"

"Words do not work on idiots," she merely tells him.

She somehow manages to fix her hair and once that is done, walks away.

He shakes his head, eyes watching as Madoka all but lights up when Homura approaches.

"Well, she'll eventually understand." He stretches before yawning loudly.

The sound of a car approaching, and he waits for them to enter the taxi before he heads back to his job.

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Madoka enters first, door held for Sayaka and Homura who follow in after her.

Homura immediately heads to the kitchen, leftovers still in her hands. Sayaka remains in the living room, looking around the apartment as Madoka closes and locks the door.

She finds it's still the same since her last visit. There's a white, three seater couch in the middle, and a low, glass coffee table in front of that. The creme coloured walls are decorated with random pictures of the Kaname family, and there's a simple 3 tier bookshelf against the far wall, filled with more trinkets than of books.

"I'll make some tea."

Madoka's voice wakes her from her daze and Sayaka nods.

"Okay," she agrees quietly, slipping off her duffel bag and leaving it besides the couch.

She follows Madoka to the kitchen and takes a seat at one of the stools by the breakfast counter. Her eyes watch as Madoka moves around the kitchen with ease, eventually stopping at one of the cabinets by the refrigerator. She stands on her tiptoes to reach something, and wordlessly, Homura glides in besides her and pulls down the teapot for her.

"T-Thank you, Homura-chan." There's a shy smile on Madoka's face while Homura nods.

"You're welcome, Madoka. I keep telling you we should reorganize the kitchen to make it easier for you to reach certain things. Especially considering how often you drink tea..."

"Mm, but..." Madoka glances at her briefly, "I can always get you to help me get them down."

Homura nods slowly. "Yes... that is true, but I am not always home to help you."

Madoka smiles at her. "Then I just have to wait until you are."

Homura says something but Sayaka is no longer listening. Instead, she sighs softly, trying to picture herself and someone else in their place.

It sends a jolt of pain to her heart and she quickly turns away.

A soft clank as the teakettle is placed on the stove, and two cups and a teapot are set in front of Sayaka.

"It'll be done in a little bit, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka turns back to find Madoka staring at her in worry.

"Y-Yeah. Uhm. Thanks, Madoka."

Madoka quietly takes a seat across from her and Sayaka finally notices there are only two cups.

"I am going to head to bed first," Homura answers her unasked question. "Good night."

"Okay, Homura-chan. Good night." Madoka's face softens as she watches Homura head to their shared room. Once she's out of view, she turns back to Sayaka who's grinning at her. "...Shush."

The humor slowly disappears and Sayaka sighs once more. "I guess... you're wondering why I'm here?"

Madoka reaches out and her hands fidget with her empty cup. "If I had to guess... Kamijou-kun?"

Sayaka closes her eyes. "Yeah..."

Madoka nods and merely waits for her to gain her bearings. Waits until the kettle starts whistling and quickly stands to retrieve the water. Waits as the tea steeps until it's finally done and the cups are filled with hot tea.

Sayaka sighs, shoulders sagging as her hands surround her cup.

"I think... I'm going to break up with him."

Sayaka waits for Madoka's cry of surprise. For some type of protest.

Nothing.

She looks up to find Madoka merely staring at her.

"...If you think that's best."

"Madoka...?"

Madoka gives her a sad smile. "You know... you haven't really been that happy lately, Sayaka-chan. Ever since Kamijou-kun went to study abroad... maybe even before that..."

The weight on Sayaka's heart twists and she sighs. "I... was really happy, though, when he agreed to be my boyfriend."

Her words stir up memories of the huge mess that had occurred in middle school. And when that had settled, more memories from high school, when Sayaka had finally confessed and Kyousuke had accepted.

A dream come true: if he had bothered to actually pay attention to her.

Madoka nods. "But..."

"But... sometimes it's like, I wished he had chose me, instead of the violin, you know?" she whispers.

Madoka stands and moves over to her. She slips her arm around Sayaka's waist and leans her head against hers.

"Does that make me a bad person?" Sayaka chokes out.

"No," Madoka tells her firmly. "It doesn't." A pause. "...You know, Mama told me, that relationships only work if both parties can compromise. She said that... that Kamijou-kun is being too selfish."

Sayaka sniffles, laughing softly. "Of course, why am I not surprised you'd talk to your mom about this?"

"Uhm... I-It kind of came up, when she was asking about you..."

Sayaka shakes her head before she wipes her eyes. "N-No. It's fine. What did your Mama say?"

Madoka glances at her briefly. "...She said that Kamijou-kun wants too much. To him, his violin is everything. Yet at the same time, he cares about you, as well."

Sayaka breathes in a trembling breath. "Y-Yeah, could've fooled me on that part."

"He's..." Madoka frowns and forces down the irritation she feels at Kyousuke for all the pain he has caused Sayaka. "He's... too used to having you there. Even... even with what had happened with Hitomi-chan, you still stuck by him no matter how much it hurt you. And then in high school, you were always there for him. Front and center at all his recitals, even though he never bothered to make the effort to watch any of your softball games."

The memories draw a bitter smile from Sayaka.

"Even now, I'm sure he has no idea that he's hurting you. He's far off, in a different country, worrying about his own things. Being selfish and thinking you'll always be there. I think, Sayaka-chan... you should be the selfish one for once."

Sayaka closes her eyes. It's a scary thought, throwing away something she had waited for, for so long; something she had almost ruined an important friendship for.

But...

"Yeah," she breathes out with an air of finality. "I think... I'm done with being pushed aside. He… missed our anniversary again," she admits. "I thought he would've at least called... but... nothing."

It isn't anything new, but Sayaka finds she is tired of it.

Madoka continues to hug her for a few minutes before Sayaka pulls away and gives her a smile. "Thanks, Madoka."

"Of course, Sayaka-chan."

She returns to her seat.

Their conversation veers towards lighter topics, catching up on various things about school and the like. And it suddenly curves, much to Madoka's embarrassment.

"So. Any improvement with you and the Akemi front?"

Madoka blushes, choosing to take a sip of her tea instead of answering.

Sayaka grins. "Come on, seriously, Madoka. The girl is so thick headed... you need to do something so obvious even she'll finally understand how you feel about her."

Madoka places her cup down with a sigh. "You know I can't do that, Sayaka-chan. Homura-chan..." She shakes her head. "If you push her too fast, she'll run away." She remembers how Homura had reacted to meeting her parents: she had been a nervous wreck that whole week, only relaxing once their departure date for Tokyo drew closer. If that could even be called relaxed. "And... she's... a really complicated person."

Very complicated.

Sayaka sighs. "Seriously, Madoka. Why did you have to fall in love with someone with so much emotional baggage?"

"Shhh! Sayaka-chan! Not so loud!"

"She's sleeping!"

"She's not. It takes her a while to fall asleep."

Sayaka smirks at her. "You would know."

Madoka flushes. "W-We share a room. So yes, I would know."

"Uh huh."

Their conversation lulls as they both drink their tea.

"...Her brother is really nothing like her, huh?" Sayaka comments absently.

"Y-Yeah." Madoka's brows furrow.

"...She never mentioned him to you?"

"N-No. She... doesn't like talking about her family, much. If at all... but uhm. When she was... kicked out of her apartment, she mentioned maybe staying with them if she needed to."

"Huh. Think she meant him?"

"...I don't know."

"Hey." Sayaka reaches over and places her hand on Madoka's. "Don't feel bad, alright? Maybe... Maybe you gotta be selfish too, Madoka."

"Huh?" She blinks in confusion.

"You always avoid talking to her about certain things. Asking her about stuff." Sayaka shrugs. "Maybe you have to be selfish for once. I mean, she knows so much about you. She met your parents. She's living with you. Isn't it about time that maybe, you ask her for something in return?"

Madoka fidgets with her cup. "But... what... what if she runs away...?"

Sayaka smirks. "You know, I thiiiink at this point, she couldn't, even if she wanted to."

"Huh?"

"You never notice this, because you're always with her. But, she's the nicest to you and treats you differently than everyone else."

Madoka blinks and flushes once more. "R-Really?" There's a shy smile on her lips.

"Yes. I don't think she smiles at anyone else but you."

Madoka almost glows with happiness.

"So, be selfish, Madoka," Sayaka nods at her.

She glances up. "You too, Sayaka-chan," she tells her softly.

Sayaka holds out her cup. "To being selfish."

Madoka grins. "To being selfish."

A soft clink and a drink to their new resolution**s.**

Chapter 2

Just as the digits switch from 8 to 9, there's a brief click as the calm before the storm settles into the room.

It is the only warning.

Before the only alarm capable of waking Madoka blasts through her room, forcing three sleeping figures to respond in three different ways.

Homura covers her head with her pillow, trying to muffle the sound with soft cotton against her ears.

Sayaka groans and rolls over in bed, arm swinging along with her as she promptly falls back to sleep.

And Madoka opens bleary eyes, just as Sayaka's arm smacks her in the face.

"Oww... Sayaka-chan..." She sits up, rubbing her stinging nose as she glares down at the blissful looking sleeper.

She gives up a second later, sighing, and reaches over, button pressed to disable the loud noise.

She moves off the bed and proceeds to stretch, trying to ease the weariness from her body.

She's still feeling tired, less than 2 hours of sleep, but it's habit now to wake at this time.

And one day missed would send her sleeping schedule into shambles.

As she walks past Homura's futon on the way to the bathroom, a pillow is lifted, revealing a very sleepy looking Homura.

Who somehow still manages to look amazing, despite her messy hair.

At least, to Madoka.

"Morning, Homura-chan," Madoka whispers, smiling at the way lavender eyes squint at her.

"Good morning, Madoka." Her voice is slightly raspy from sleep. Or lack of.

Homura's eyes close once more; she always did have trouble getting up in the mornings.

Still smiling, Madoka continues into the bathroom to get ready for the day.

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The smell of coffee is permeating through the air when Homura finally emerges from the bedroom, barefoot and dressed in a simple grey sweater and sweats.

Madoka calls them her lazy clothes.

She lets her call them whatever she wants; they were 500yen off the clearance rack and they fit.

Fit comfortably enough that she bought three more sets in different colours, giving the red ones to Madoka since she always seemed so enamored by her clothes.

Always borrowing her sweaters for one reason or another.

She doesn't mind though. If she ever wants to wear something pink, she knows Madoka would offer up her entire wardrobe.

She continues down the hallway, past the second bathroom in the apartment, as muffled sounds slowly rise in volume.

As Homura enters the living room and passes the couch, Madoka glances up from the kitchen when she steps into view. There's a screen in front of her, the obvious source of indistinguishable voices.

"Coffee's almost ready," Madoka tells her when she's close enough. "No contacts?" she teases, already knowing the answer: Homura's eyes are almost squeezed shut behind those thick framed glasses of hers that Madoka secretly adores.

Homura shakes her head, continuing her slow shuffle to the kitchen, fighting back another yawn.

"My eyes are broken," she murmurs, taking a seat on the closest stool by the counter.

"You can go back to sleep. Sayaka-chan probably won't wake up until noon..."

"Mm..." Homura makes no effort to move.

Madoka hits a few buttons, widening the screen and moving it so that she can watch as well.

Morning News.

"...string of robberies continue to increase as temperatures continue to rise. Another incident occurred around the 2nd Avenue overhead pass early this morning, where another victim was robbed at knife point, marking this the 4th robbery to occur this week. The suspects are currently still at large, with no leads or possible arrests in sight, despite an increase of security and video surveillance in the area. Authorities are warning citizens to avoid situations which may place—"

Madoka changes the channel and lowers the volume.

She turns to Homura with a frown. "We were really nearby, yesterday... If Sayaka-chan had walked..."

Homura squints at her. "She didn't. She is fine."

Madoka sighs softly. "Homura-chan, you always take that path when you walk home at night from your tutoring sessions. Promise me you will be more careful?"

Homura has her attention on the screen, bright colours distracting her.

"Homura-chan?"

She makes an uncommitted noise.

The cartoon fades to black as Madoka switches off the screen.

Homura blinks and turns to see Madoka glaring at her, hands on her hips.

Which would look quite intimidating, if only she wasn't dressed in those over sized, red sweats of hers.

"Homura-chan."

Homura nods. "...Do not worry, Madoka, I will stay safe."

Madoka eyes her critically, weighing and measuring her words.

"...Alright."

There's a soft beep, interrupting the lull in conversation.

The coffee is done.

They both stand, each taking their respective roles in the kitchen as they fall into their usual routine. Madoka is in charge of pouring the coffee, while Homura fetches the cream and grabs the sugar jar along the way.

Once their cups are filled, and coffee softened to their liking, Madoka takes her seat across from Homura.

They drink in comfortable silence.

Or, at least, Homura does.

Madoka is jittery, even though she has yet to take a sip. She keeps glancing to Homura, and then back to her coffee.

It happens enough times that Homura finally places her cup onto the counter with a soft clatter.

More awake now with caffeine in her body, she turns amused eyes to Madoka. "Madoka."

"H-Hm?" She looks up to see Homura smiling lightly at her.

It makes her remember Sayaka's words; her heart skips a beat.

"Is there something bothering you?"

"Uh..." Madoka glances away. "W-What makes you think that, Homura-chan?"

Homura folds her hands and places them besides her cup on the counter. "Well, I'm not quite sure. Maybe it's because you keep looking at me?"

Madoka fidgets nervously.

"...Maybe I need to get my eyes checked then?" Homura comments as she reaches for her coffee. "I keep seeing these strange pink eyes staring at me."

Madoka sighs. "Alright, yes, I was looking at you."

Homura nods. "Good. The first step is admitting you have a problem."

She takes another sip, though Madoka can see her lips are still quirked up in amusement.

Madoka huffs at her. "Homura-chan! I'm—trying to be serious here!"

Homura lowers her cup, lavender eyes suddenly searching Madoka's face. "What's wrong?"

That intense stare sends Madoka's cheeks aflame.

"N-Nothing!" she squeaks out, turning away to avoid those eyes.

"Madoka? Is there something wrong?"

She panics at Homura's serious tone, quickly turning back. "N-No! N-Nothing's wrong, Homura-chan!"

"Is... it something you have trouble telling me?"

The amusement is long gone, just a frown now present on her lips.

"Y-Your—"

Homura nods in encouragement.

"Your brother seems nice!" Madoka blurts out.

Homura blinks. "My... brother...?"

"Y-Yes, your brother! Uhm. He's... He's nothing like you..."

There's a pause, before Homura suddenly averts her eyes. "Oh. Uhm..."

"Homura-chan...?"

Homura pulls her cup closer. "Uhm. He... He asked about you, last night. Uhm, this morning. As well."

"E-Eh?"

"He's not dating anyone right now, I don't think," Homura mumbles softly. "He's—a decent guy, I guess. But he tends to flirt a lot..."

"W-Wait! What are you talking about, Homura-chan?"

Homura looks at her. "Uhm. You're... interested in him, aren't you?"

"Eh!?"

Homura stares at her blankly. "I-Isn't that why you're asking about him?"

"What!"

Madoka wants to reach out to slap her upside the head—which most likely shows on her face as Homura backs away ever so slightly.

"Uhm..." Homura holds out a hand. "Okay, wait. T-Time out."

Madoka nods in agreement.

They both take a sip of their coffee to calm down.

A few seconds pass, and they look up at the same time.

"Ready?" Homura asks her.

She nods again.

"Okay, you start."

Madoka takes a deep breath before exhaling slowly. "Alright. I was—asking about your brother. Because you have never mentioned him before. I only want to know about him, because he's related to *you*. I definitely do *not* want to date him. I just want to know more about you."

"Oh. Uhm..." Homura runs her thumb along the handle of her coffee cup. "I see. So, just to make sure... you aren't asking whether or not he's available?"

Madoka shakes her head.

"So, you definitely don't want to date him?"

She nods.

Homura breathes out a sigh of relief. "Okay. That's—that's good."

Her reaction has Madoka's heartbeat speeding up—was she jealous?

"Because—he's never really had a girlfriend for longer than a month," Homura explains, effectively squashing Madoka's dreams. "I mean, he's a decent guy, but..." she shakes her head. "It's... It's good you don't like him. Uhm. In that way, Madoka. H—He would just end up hurting you, or something..."

That sounds promising at least.

"...it would give me an excuse to beat him up though..." Homura murmurs softly, most likely to herself.

"Homura-chan...?"

"Uhm." She looks at Madoka. "So, okay. You... want to know more about me...?"

Madoka blushes, knowing how that sounds. "Y-Yes. B-Because, well, you don't really talk about yourself, you know? I mean, I've known you for a while now, and you've met my family and we visited my hometown together—"

"Madoka?"

"And we live together, but it's like, I feel I don't even know that much about you. Well, I mean, I know some things. Like your favourite colour is purple, and you prefer cats to dogs—"

"Madoka?"

"And that you like to drink your coffee with more cream than sugar, and you prefer bread in the mornings. And there—"

"Madoka!"

She jumps and turns to Homura, who coughs lightly into her hand, cheeks slightly flushed.

"I—get it, okay?" Homura tells her with a small smile. "You want to know more about me."

Madoka nods. "Y-Yes."

"...Alright. What do you want to know?"

Madoka blinks at her. "W-What?"

Homura glances away briefly. "I mean, I'm sure you have some questions you'd like to ask me...?"

Madoka eyes widen.

"Don't look so shocked," Homura tells her, lips twitching. "I'm... not that bad at talking about myself, am I?"

Silence.

Homura sighs.

"I—should really work on that, I suppose. But, uhm." She reaches for her cup, peering inside and seeing that it's half empty. "What would you like to ask me, Madoka?"

Madoka stares at her, mind suddenly blank. "Uhmm... T-That is..."

"...Maybe it'll help if we eat something first?" Homura suggests, already moving to stand.

"I-Is there a time limit?" Madoka asks her suddenly.

"Time limit?"

"Uhm, I mean, if... if like an hour passes... will you no longer answer my questions...?"

Homura tilts her head. "Is this another one of those things you did at home?"

Madoka nods: the 'Time out thing' is something Homura had learned when she stayed over during Spring Break.

Homura coughs into her hand to hide her laugh, but Madoka can see how her eyes almost twinkle in amusement.

Almost—because they never really seemed to reach that point.

But, one day—

"No," Homura tells her. "There is no time limit."

A smile blooms on Madoka's face. "R-Really?"

"Yes, but..."

"But...?"

Homura looks at the floor. "Some... questions I won't be able to answer. N-Not because I don't want to... but..."

"T-That's fine! Anything... anything you can tell me, I'll be glad to know..."

They share a smile—though Madoka's is more a wide grin, while Homura's is a twitch of her lips.

"You can ask me things as we make breakfast..." Homura comments as she walks around the counter to enter the kitchen. "Oh." She stops suddenly, turning to Madoka. "But... it might be hard for you to cook and think at the same time..."

Madoka stares at her for a moment, mouth agape.

She snaps her mouth shut.

Homura smiles, and jumps away from Madoka's punch.

"Homura-chan! Get back here!"

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Pink eyes watch as the eggs in the pan pop and sizzle over the low heat. She's absently chewing on her lower lip, brow furrowed as she decides on her first question. Seeking a visual clue on where to begin, she glances behind her, to where Homura is standing in front of the toaster.

Lavender eyes no doubt watching the bread, ready to swoop in during that last second, when the toast hovers between lightly toasted and horribly burnt: the only two options the toaster had, after a small mishap with an overloaded fuse.

That Sayaka swears was not her fault.

She turns back to the eggs, brown edges signaling that one side is done. A quick lift of the pan, both eggs flipped simultaneously, landing perfectly.

She turns off the heat, letting them sit and cook from the remaining warmth.

She's still not close to thinking of a question—there's too many she wants to ask.

But, she doesn't want to pry too deep.

There's a chime, prompting her to turn around. She watches as Homura slips the perfectly made toast onto the plate.

It makes her smile.

"My job is complete," Homura tells her, noticing Madoka's gaze. "...Perhaps we should look into buying another toaster, Madoka."

"Mm." Madoka grins. "But then what would you do?"

Because Madoka can never get the timing right, it's an ongoing joke between them, that the only thing Homura is good for in the kitchen is to watch the toaster.

"Well," Homura appears thoughtful. "I can't be fired yet; you still aren't willing to reorganize the cabinets. So at least I am still useful in that aspect."

And to grab items that Madoka is unable to reach.

"You are awful today," Madoka tells her, sticking out her tongue, even as there's a smile on her face. "Is it because you didn't get enough sleep?"

Homura settles the loaded plate onto the counter. "Maybe. Or maybe, it's because someone still snores even though she claims she doesn't."

Madoka grins. "I didn't hear Sayaka-chan at all."

"I dreamt I was on a motorboat, Madoka. I've never been on one—but somehow I dreamt that I was on one. It was loud."

This earns her a laugh. "You really are bad today, Homura-chan. I'm definitely going to tell Sayaka-chan you compared her to a boat."

"Good." Homura nods, back turned as she reaches for the coffee pot. "Maybe then she'll finally admit that she snores."

"I doubt it..." Madoka starts to plate the eggs onto two separate dishes. "When we had our class trip in high school, the girls from the other room overheard her... but they didn't actually know it was her."

She adds a sprinkle of pepper, before she moves to the counter to join Homura.

"Let me guess, she blamed it on someone else?" Homura asks her dryly, filling their cups with more coffee.

Madoka nods, setting the plates down. "Five girls in the room. All of us denied it, trying to save Sayaka-chan the embarrassment..." She shakes her head. "It was a three day, four night trip. We became the 'aviation room' because it sounded like planes were taking flight..."

Mid sip, Homura chokes on her coffee, coughing as she tries to hold back her laughter.

Madoka grins, placing her hands on Homura's back, rubbing circles to help relieve her cough.

"The boys though, made it even worse. They somehow found out, and every time they saw one of us, they'd make airplane noises. It continued almost until graduation, before Sayaka-chan threatened to beat them up."

Homura manages to calm down somewhat, straightening up even with an amused smile on her lips.

"Thank you, Madoka, I am fine now."

Madoka reluctantly removes her hand to take her usual seat as Homura walks around the counter to hers.

They both dig into their light meal, Madoka eating and waiting for Homura to take a few bites.

She waits, until Homura lowers her fork and finally glances up.

"I... thought of a question," Madoka tells her, sounding almost timid.

Homura nods, gesturing for her to continue.

"Uhm... How old is your brother?"

"...Are you sure you're not interested in him?"

"It's a safe question!" Madoka protests.

"...Which means there are unsafe questions?"

"Uhm..."

"He's... 23, or so. I think." Homura pauses, calculating the years in her head. "...Yes. Something like that."

"So he's 5 years older than you..."

"Yes." She shrugs. "Until December."

"Do you... have any other siblings?"

"No. At least, not that I know of."

Madoka blinks. "Uhm... Y-You said, he isn't your actual real brother...?"

Homura nods, eyes on her plate as she cuts into the egg with her fork. "Half. He and I share the same father, but different mothers."

"Oh..."

"Before you ask, my mother was the mistress."

"U-Uhm..." Madoka quickly glances down to her food. "I-I w-wasn't... going to ask that..."

"It's fine."

She looks up and Homura is giving her a smile—that looks less than fine.

"It's... things tend to spread kind of quickly in schools here... Let's just say that almost everyone knew about my situation, made much worse since I had to attend a Christian School..."

Madoka pushes her toast around, suddenly feeling awful for bringing up these memories.

"U-Uhm... O-Oh... s-so you went to a Christian School...?"

"Yes, for elementary school."

"Not for Middle School?" Madoka glances up to see Homura shaking her head.

"No. I was...sick for a while. I missed most of Middle School."

Madoka sits up straighter. "Sick? You were sick?"

Homura looks at her. "I mentioned before I was in the hospital for a bit."

"Yes, but you said 'bit!' As in a brief moment, where you were sick for days and then you went home!"

Homura places her fork down when she notices that Madoka looks visibly upset. "Uhm. Well, I had a heart defect when I was younger."

"Heart defect? How bad was it?"

"Mm. Bad enough that I needed a new heart."

"What? You had a heart transplant?!" Madoka demands as she stares at her.

"Uhm, y-yes..."

"You're constantly supposed to take medication for that! I've never seen you take any!"

"Uhm... We... don't see each other all the time..."

"Homura-chan! You've been living here for months now, and I have not seen one pill from you at all! Where do you even keep them?"

"...I-In my duffel..."

Madoka grits her teeth. "So you have been deliberately hiding them from me?"

"N-No..."

"When do you take them?"

She averts her eyes. "Uhm... after you leave for your class..."

"..."

"I-It's a set schedule...?"

"I can't believe this. Out of all things you chose to hide from me, this is one of them!? What are you taking?"

"Uhm... I can't remember the names right now, but... an immunosuppressant... some supplements... high blood pressure medicine..."

"Side effects?"

"They... uhm. They lowered my dosage since I'm doing so well... mostly it's just insomnia now...some occasional nausea..."

"How often are your check-ups?"

"Monthly... Mostly for blood work..."

"...Is that where you go, every second Sunday of the month?"

She blinks. "Uhm... Yes...?"

Madoka closes her eyes.

Things are slowly starting to fall into place; explanations to Homura's strange quirks.

Her reluctance to going out anywhere before 11am. Refusals to take any kind of morning class.

Always brushing her teeth at night at a set time. Making sure they always arrive home before 11pm...

They were just excuses to take her medicine; maybe to wait for the nausea to pass.

Not to mention her shyness in the bathroom—that went beyond simple embarrassment. Madoka had accidentally walked in on her once, and Homura had completely panicked. If she had slammed the door any harder, it would've broken Madoka's nose.

She had apologized, of course, but it explains *so much* that Madoka just wants to scream.

Eyes open. "...Why didn't you tell me?"

There's an underlying hurt tone to Madoka's voice, forcing Homura to finally look up. "Uhm..."

"Were you ever going to tell me...?" she whispers.

"...It's... I... I didn't think it was important..."

Madoka slams her hand onto the counter, dishware rattling and her wincing at the sudden pain on her palm.

She ignores it; it's nothing compared to whatever's twisting around her heart.

"You're still susceptible to organ rejection! Your medicine lowers your immunity to diseases! You're constantly at risk for all these things! How is it *not* important?! Life expectancy for heart transplant patients—" she cuts herself off, fighting down a sob.

Homura holds out her hands, trying to calm her down.

"T-There's been advancements in treatment for transplants, Madoka. My checkups... my doctor tells me I've been doing really well these last few years... I-If it continues, they project I'll be able to live for 15 more years... maybe 20...?"

"...When did you get your transplant, Homura-chan?"

"U-Uhm. Around 5 years ago..."

"15 years..." Madoka places her face in her hands. "15 years to go...?"

"20... if uhm, if I'm lucky...? P-Plus, I may be eligible for another transplant if complications do occur...depending...on some things..."

It does little to reassure, and only makes Madoka cry harder.

\\

Sayaka finally stumbles out of bed half past noon.

She walks into the living room, still dressed in her sleeping clothes: t-shirt and shorts, and hair still mussed from sleep.

"Mado—whoa. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Sayaka blinks, staring at the two figures sitting very closely on the sofa.

Madoka glances behind her. Sayaka's expecting a smile—some kind of gleeful grin, instead she's greeted with a very miserable looking Madoka.

"Uh... Did something happen...?"

Madoka sniffles and suddenly starts punching Homura's arm.

"This! Idiot! Right! Here! Never! Said! Anything! About! Her! Stupid! Heart! Transplant!"

"O-Ow. M-Madoka—"

Madoka slaps her arm this time.

"Mado—"

"*No*, you said you'd make it up to me. *So sit here and be quiet*."

She places her head against Homura's shoulder, eyes still very angry and jaw clenched.

Homura nods nervously. She throws Sayaka a look, almost begging her for help.

Sayaka steps closer. "Uh, but, Homura's all better now, isn't she...? I mean, she's... she looks pretty healthy."

Madoka shakes her head, tugging the blanket around her and Homura closer.

"Uhm... okay." Sayaka stares at Homura who leans back on the couch in resignation. "Uh... so, what's the plan today...?"

Madoka reaches forward and snatches a plastic case off the table. She holds it up for Sayaka to see.

"Today's movie day." Her voice is flat. "Pizza for lunch. The menu..."

She grabs the smaller projection screen nearby and haphazardly holds it behind her to Sayaka.

"Choose something. Homura-chan and I usually split a vegetarian one, but I know you like some type of protein."

Sayaka takes it out of her hands. "Uh, alright. Thanks..."

She glances over to Madoka, shaking her head in slight confusion.

At least Homura looks just as confused.

Still standing, Sayaka silently browses through the menu, eyes quickly bypassing all the vegetables. It takes her only a moment and she's decided: a regular Combination pizza.

She clears her throat, hoping to clear the air. "Uh, so, I know what I want...?"

Homura shifts uncomfortably. "M-Madoka...?"

"What."

"Uhm... W-Would it be alright if I went to use the restroom...?"

Madoka finally turns to look at her.

"...Please?" Homura squeaks out, pressing deeper into the couch to avoid that glare.

Madoka sighs. She unwraps the blankets around them.

Homura quickly hops off the couch, stumbling slightly in her haste to move away before Madoka changes her mind.

Once she disappears into the half bathroom in the hallway, Sayaka jumps in to fill the empty spot Homura had just abandoned.

The couch bounces, announcing her presence to the Madoka who is still glaring at the floor.

"Okay. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but... shouldn't you be happy? You two just suddenly got a lot closer...?"

Madoka finally looks up, giving Sayaka a clear view of her swollen eyes.

"H-Hey, what's wrong? What happened?" Sayaka throws an arm around Madoka's smaller shoulders.

"I was... I was," Madoka sniffles once more. "I was b-being selfish. This morning..."

A firm hand on her back. "Uh huh. What happened?"

"H-Homura-chan... s-she used to be sick."

"Right. Her transplant? But, that means she has a new one right? So, she's good now?"

Madoka shakes her head, tears trailing down her cheeks. "T-Transplant patients... the l-longest they s-survive is...25 to 30...years post operation..."

"Oh..." Sayaka glances to the side. "Uhm... well..."

"B-But..." Madoka continues, wiping at her eyes. "M-Most average a-around 10 years..." She sobs. "5 years already passed... S-Sayaka-chan..."

"H-Hey," Sayaka holds her close. "That's... that's just the average, you know? It doesn't mean that everyone follows those guides..."

Madoka sniffles again.

"Hey," Sayaka nudges her with her elbow. "Come on. You always tell me that 'Homura is above average.' And that she's crazily stubborn. Didn't you two argue about something stupid, like where to place the futon in the room, for weeks?"

Madoka slaps her arm.

"I mean. What I mean is, Homura's... I can't see her accepting the 'average,' you know? The average is 10 years? So what? She's probably gonna glare at that average with those slanted eyes of hers, and then say something like, 'No,' and then walk away or something. She'll even look at that 25 and 30, and ignore that too!"

Madoka can't help it—she laughs trying to picture it.

"Yeah? See? Even though it sounds crazy, doesn't it seem like something she'd do?"

"Yeah... i-it does..."

"Yeah. You okay now?"

Madoka nods. "Y-Yeah."

"Alright, now go wash your face." Sayaka pushes her away. "You're getting snot all over me."

Madoka holds out her hands, threatening to wipe them on Sayaka.

"Eww! Madoka germs! Get away! They're going to make me short!"

"You jerk!"

Sayaka laughs in response, Madoka joining her a second later.

/

Homura pokes her head through the doorway, breathing a sigh of relief when she notices the figure sitting on the couch does not have pink hair.

Her footsteps are quiet, and it isn't until she's taking a seat that Sayaka finally realizes she's there.

"Whoa! Where did you come from?"

"My mother..." Homura tells her dryly. "Though, some say she might've been from some place far away, as I have never met her."

"Uhh..." Sayaka scratches her head.

Homura settles into the couch, not at all bothered by Sayaka's silence.

She glances at Sayaka. "Uhm. Is... is she still upset?"

Sayaka props her bare feet onto the table—only able to do so because Madoka is not here.

"Well, she's no longer crying her eyes out, if that's what you mean."

"...Yes."

Sayaka leans her head back, tilting it so she can stare at the ceiling. "Geez, Homura. Couldn't you have, I don't know, handled this some better way?"

She waves her hand around, almost smacking Homura in the process if she hadn't moved in time.

An ignored glare.

"Okay, so... do you even know why she's upset?"

Homura blinks. "Uhm... no, not exactly."

Sayaka sighs, this time deliberately reaching over to smack Homura on the arm.

"...Ow."

"You pretty much dropped a bombshell on her. Did you forget she's studying medicine? That she's going to become a nurse? Hell, if you told me you had a heart transplant, I'd be like, okay, you got a new heart, right? Big deal?"

"Yes."

She smacks Homura once more, harder this time: a satisfying sound echos off the walls.

Homura moves further away.

"But Madoka? Madoka actually knows what this stuff means. You... you pretty much lied to her."

"..."

"I know what you're thinking—you didn't lie, you just kind of left things out. *They are the same thing*. At least, to Madoka, they are."

"..."

"You've known her for what, half a year now?"

Homura nods, even though Sayaka is not looking at her.

"Well, it doesn't really matter. Because, Madoka isn't like you. She is not a person layered with different walls around her; she wears her heart on her sleeve. The Madoka you first met, is the same Madoka you see right now. Honest and kind... the kind of person anyone would be lucky enough to have in their lives. Do you still not understand why she's upset?"

"...15... or even 20 more years is a long time though," Homura tells her softly. "I mean, technically, I wasn't supposed to live past the age of 15..."

Sayaka growls, moving quickly and slaps Homura on the head.

"Ow! Would you stop that!"

"You better not let Madoka hear you say that! You stupid, dense—"

"Sayaka-chan?"

They both freeze, for different reasons.

"H-Hey, Madoka." Sayaka turns, giving her a nervous smile.

"Have you decided what pizza you want? I'm going to place the orders." Pink eyes flicker to Homura briefly, who looks away.

"Yup! Just a simple Combination for me."

"Alright."

Madoka silently plods towards them, reaching for the menu screen and stops right in front of Homura.

She looks up just as Madoka deliberately drops down into her lap.

"M-Madoka...?"

Madoka shifts, twisting her body until her back is now leaning against the arm of the sofa, and her legs end up in Sayaka's lap.

"I'm going to place the orders now, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her with a smile.

"Uhm. A-Alright..."

Homura looks over to Sayaka for advice, but all she receives is a subtle shake of her head.

Her eyes nervously dart around the room, before she tries to make herself comfortable against the couch.

While Madoka does the same against her.

\

When the pizza arrives, to Homura's relief, Madoka finally moves.

"Here you go, Homura-chan." Madoka hands her a plate. She turns around and gives one to Sayaka. "I'll go get the lights. Can you start the movie, Homura-chan?"

"Alright..."

Homura does as told, loading the movie into the projector as the lights turn off. She readjusts the settings, widening the screen so that it fills the wall in front just as Madoka rejoins them.

To Homura's embarrassment, Madoka sidles in right next to her once more. A quick glance over, and she can see that Sayaka is now sitting comfortably against the other side of the couch.

And that there's plenty of room beside her. Enough, that all three of them should be able to sit without touching.

"Lift your arm, Homura-chan," Madoka whispers.

Silently, Homura raises her arm as Madoka pulls the blankets around them.

Like earlier, when Madoka deliberately leans against her, it suddenly seems a tad bit too warm.

The darkness, at least, allows her to hide her blush. She focuses on eating her pizza, as Madoka and Sayaka engross themselves in the movie.

/

Two slices later, Homura finds herself nodding off; not enough sleep, and a movie that isn't holding her attention at all.

Madoka and Sayaka seem to be enjoying it, at least.

Homura stares at the screen, watching as the main character spouts some kind of cheesy line as to why she can't marry her fiance.

She stifles a yawn, shifting slightly to make herself a bit more comfortable, accidentally brushing her arm against Madoka's in the process.

Pink eyes glance to her. She shakes her head, mouthing a quick apology.

The brighter scenery from the screen suddenly floods the room with light, enabling Homura to see that Madoka seems to be deep in thought.

The light fades just as Madoka pulls away. It's a sudden surprise—the disappearance of warmth, but it's brief as hands are placed on her legs.

She jumps at the touch; she's always been ticklish there. "M-Madoka?"

"Shhhhhh!"

Homura rolls her eyes; it figures that Sayaka would be a romantic at heart.

There's a sudden waft of strawberries and a warm breath against her cheek.

"Put your legs up on the sofa, Homura-chan." Her voice is soft, close to her ear.

"W-What?"

"Shhh!"

Homura wants to glare at her, but Madoka is still there, blocking her view and her movement.

"Like you're going to lie down," Madoka clarifies, finally moving away.

Homura stares, but the movie is taking place at night now, and the only light from the kitchen window isn't bright enough for her to see her clearly.

"Homura-chan."

The fact that Sayaka only shushes her even though Madoka is being just as loud makes her want to grumble.

Instead, she lifts her legs, stretching them in front of her while leaning her back against the arm of the sofa. There's still enough space in between her and Sayaka, that she'd need to stretch quite a bit in order to comfortably kick her.

Just as she realizes that she has no idea where Madoka is going to sit, her answer drops down in front of her.

And Madoka starts molding her body against hers.

"Ma—"

"Shh!"

"You shh!" Homura throws back, tempted to pull a muscle in order to deliver a swift kick.

"Homura-chan," Madoka sounds slightly amused, her hands reaching for thin arms. "Relax, okay?"

There is no such thing as 'relaxing' when Madoka is this close. After a few struggles, Madoka finally manages to loop Homura's arms around her waist.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Madoka—"

"Shh! Stop flirting already! Both of you!"

Homura tries to sit up, intent on showing Sayaka her anger. And finds it's rather difficult with Madoka sitting on top of her.

She settles for yelling instead. "They're not even talking!"

"Which is what you should be doing!"

Madoka leans back, giving Homura another clear whiff strawberries—she's finally able to place it: Madoka's favourite shampoo.

"Homura-chan."

As if sensing she's pouting, Madoka pats her hand in comfort.

She feels Madoka shift slightly.

"You can sleep." A soft whisper just as a blanket is pulled up around them.

Homura blinks.

It takes her moment, before she relaxes, ever so slightly.

She's entirely too aware of how close they are, yet she can't deny how comforting holding Madoka is.

Friends... friends did this, right...**?**

AN: To answer a few questions: Yes, something might happen, yes, maybe~, thanksx5, not yet!

What questions are these? I'm not quite sure. *Yawns*

Chapter 3

Fingers brush away tears as an inconspicuous sniffle sounds; the credits are rolling while the ending score plays.

"Man, that was such a great movie." Her voice slightly cracks, and she clears her throat in embarrassment. "So, what's next?"

She raises her arms, stretching to relieve her muscles from sitting for so long.

"Madoka?"

Silence.

Sayaka sighs and stands to locate the lights.

She wanders aimlessly around the perimeter of the room, hitting every switch until the last one finally does what she had set out to do. Light floods in, giving her a clear view of the two sleeping figures nestled together on the couch.

"Hmm." A hand on her chin as she debates.

A second later, a devious grin. Her feet guide her to the bedroom.

When the loud shutter of her camera phone echoes through the room, she winces, quickly pulling back to check to see if they heard.

Nope, still sound asleep.

She sighs in relief. "Alright... I guess... I could study a bit while I wait for them to wake up."

/

Books discarded next to her with headphones covering her ears, Sayaka browses the internet, still waiting.

"Ugh... it's already been two hours. I want to get ice cream, but I don't have any credits to buy any..."

She sets her headphones down and abandons her temporary perch, slowly making her way back to the couch.

"Hmm, but Madoka is really hard to wake up. How does Homura even manage...?"

"...Persistence."

"Gah!" Sayaka jumps at the voice. When she looks over, she sees lavender eyes peering at her behind those thick glasses. "Geez! If you were already awake why didn't you say anything?"

"...I did. I assume you had your headphones on?"

"Ah..." Sayaka stares at her. "Wait! How long have you been awake?'

Homura shifts, trying to pull away from Madoka; Madoka merely snuggles closer.

She sighs. "...I've been awake long enough to enjoy your soliloquy on checkered shirts, and whether or not you should buy them..."

Sayaka glares at her. "W-What! That was not a soliloquy!"

"...and your jazzy rendition of Canon in D."

Sayaka flushes, face red.

"You should buy those shirts. Your arguments are really convincing," Homura comments, nodding to herself.

"S-Shut up! A-Anyways, if you've been awake for that long, why haven't you moved from your spot? Don't tell me," Sayaka smirks, "you actually enjoy being that close to Madoka?"

Homura doesn't reply. She concentrates, struggling to remove Madoka's hands from around her waist.

Like her previous attempts, Madoka's hold is steadfast and frustratingly stubborn.

"She is surprisingly strong, despite her shorter frame," Homura mutters, hand trying to slip under Madoka's fingers as she tries to pry them off of her.

She succeeds—in having Madoka switch her grip from Homura's waist to her hand.

She blinks, a frown on her lips. She settles for the usual approach: shaking her awake. "Madoka. Wake up, Madoka."

Sayaka laughs. "The infamous 'koala hold' strikes again! Haven't seen that in a while!"

Homura's eyes flicker to her. "'Koala hold?'"

Sayaka nods. "You know! Those little animals that eat those smelly leaves?"

"...I am quite aware of what a koala is..."

Sayaka sticks her tongue out. "Anyways, their babies, they cling to their mothers for months. Hence, 'Koala hold!' All through elementary and middle school, anyone unlucky enough to share a bed with Madoka during our sleepovers always had to pry that baby koala from them in the morning. She kind of broke that habit in high school, but..." Sayaka grins. "Guess some habits just die hard."

Homura sighs. "I see... and, how do I remove this koala...?"

Sayaka smirks. "Persistence."

Homura bites back another sigh. She tries to shake her awake once more. "Madoka... Madoka wake up."

"...You think that's going to work?"

Sayaka's voice is suddenly by her ear; Homura almost jumps when she turns to see Sayaka peering at her from above, head resting on the back of the couch.

Madoka murmurs something under her breath, face content as she shifts lightly.

Homura stares at her, deciding her options.

Click

Homura turns.

"Smile!" Sayaka tells her.

The sound of a closing shutter, this time complete with a flash.

Homura winces, trying to blink away the dots dancing every time her eyes close. "...What are you doing...?"

"Just taking some pictures."

Homura's glare is interrupted when another flash blindsides her. "...You do not need the flash when you are so close."

"You know, you looked really comfortable earlier." Sayaka ignores her comment, once again kneeling down to become a floating head resting atop the sofa.

"...I will buy you a checkered shirt if you help remove this koala..."

Sayaka turns her head. "Just one?"

"...Two?"

"Hmm..."

Madoka shifts again.

"...Three?"

Sayaka stares, eyebrows raised. "Getting kinda desperate, aren't you?"

"...I really, really need to use the restroom. And Madoka is leaning on my bladder..."

"Ahh," Sayaka appears thoughtful. "Well, I know a surefire way that will wake her up."

"I am listening..."

Sayaka leans in, eyes gleaming. "Kiss her."

"..." Homura glances down to the sleeping Madoka.

When she remains quiet, Sayaka's eyes widen. "W-Wait, are you really going to...?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Homura mumbles, her free hand moving to Madoka's face. "Kisses only work because they generally block the flow of oxygen. Which means this should work..."

Sayaka watches as Homura covers Madoka's mouth and nose with her hand.

"Boooooring... Hey, if this works, you owe me three shirts."

"One," Homura murmurs. "It's a derivation of your original suggestion, but not a complete mimicry... A triangle for partial credit..."

"Two," Sayaka tells her with a frown, watching as Madoka starts moving, "and I don't send the pictures I took to Madoka's mom."

Homura can feel Madoka trying to suck in more air against her hand; it makes her feel bad, but she's reaching her limit.

"None," Homura replies, "and I continue to keep the secret of what happened to Madoka's favourite sweater the last time you visited."

"..."

Homura glances over to see that Sayaka has her head bowed in defeat, but there's a sudden gasp from Madoka. She quickly pulls her hand away.

Madoka coughs, breathing in deeply.

But she's awake.

Why didn't she think of this before?

"Good morning, Madoka," Homura says instead.

Pink eyes widen. She tilts her head up to see those familiar lavender eyes staring at her. "H-Homura-chan...?"

She's suddenly entirely too aware that she's all but pressed flushed against Homura's body.

"Can you please move, Madoka? I need to use the restroom..."

Madoka gulps nervously, immediately scrambling off her. "S-Sorry!" she squeaks out, tripping over the discarded blankets on the floor.

Homura barely manages to steady her. "Be more careful," she tells her, quickly letting go. "Excuse me," she murmurs, footsteps hurried as she moves to the bathroom.

Madoka rubs at her tired eyes.

Sayaka's face slowly warps into a grin. "You know..."

When Homura steps out of the bathroom, she can hear Madoka's voice carrying down through the hallway. Judging by Sayaka's laughter, and Madoka's shrieks, it doesn't sound like Madoka is happy at all.

Which is confirmed when she enters the living room: Madoka is chasing Sayaka around the couch.

"You jerk! Why would you even suggest that?" Madoka glares at Sayaka, face red, messy pink hair from their impromptu nap adding to her disheveled appearance.

Sayaka grins. "I was just helping things along! You two are you moving soooo slow! And you should've seen her face when I suggested it! She really looked like she wanted to—"

"Homura-chan!" Madoka yells out when she notices Homura walking across the room.

She turns to look at her. "Yes, Madoka?"

"U-Uhm..."

Homura stares, head tilted in slight curiosity.

"Uh... that is..." Madoka glances at Sayaka for help.

Sensing Madoka needed time for whatever, Homura continues to the kitchen, but stops when she notices the mess that Sayaka left on the counter.

"Miki Sayaka."

"Yeah?" Sayaka looks over.

Homura gestures to the stacks of books and notebooks strewn around, next to the opened laptop and headphones.

Sayaka waves her off. "Relax, I'll clean it before I leave."

"...Are you leaving tonight?" Homura asks her.

"Tomorrow."

Homura frowns at her, arms crossed at her chest. "Then clean it now."

Madoka quickly intervenes when she sees Sayaka mimicking Homura's pose. "Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka grits her teeth, sighing angrily. "Fine."

Homura nods in approval, before she steps into the kitchen for a glass of water.

One clean counter later, Homura is sipping at her water as the three of them sit, gathered at the breakfast bar, discussing plans for the rest of the day.

"You two are so boring," Sayaka groans as she places her arms on the counter. "You know, most of the time friends are supposed to take their friends out when they break up with their significant others..."

A light clatter as Homura places her cup down. "You broke up with your boyfriend?"

Sayaka turns at her, surprised at her interest. "Yeah. Well, not yet... but I will be..."

"I see."

When Homura says nothing after that, Sayaka frowns. "...That's it?"

"Hm?" Homura quirks an eyebrow.

"'I see?' That's all I get from you?" Sayaka demands, slapping her open hand down. "Can't you at least pretend you care?"

"S-Sayaka-chan..." Madoka reaches out to try and calm her.

Only because Madoka looks slightly bothered that Homura sighs. "Very well." They both turn to her. "And how do you feel, now that you have decided you're going to break up with him?"

Sayaka blinks. "Eh?"

Homura rests her elbows on the counter, chin placed on folded hands and adopts a thoughtful expression. "No, really. Did you love him?"

"Uhm," Sayaka glances at Madoka in confusion, but she shakes her head, equally confused. "I guess... I mean... I... he... he was my first love," she admits, voice small.

"I see. And what was it that drew you towards him?"

"What?"

"What made you fall in love with him?" Homura clarifies.

It's almost freaking Sayaka out with how Homura is staring at her and actually looking—interested. "Uhhhh... if... if I had to pinpoint a time... it was when I went to his first recital..."

"So music was your common interest?"

Sayaka shakes her head. "No. It... wasn't the music really—just... how he looked playing it... Like... I don't know how to describe it... but... just watching him play the violin..."

"So, the feelings he invoked when he played the violin is what made you fall in love?"

Sayaka nods. "Y-Yeah... I guess... I guess you could say."

Homura hums softly. "Interesting. So, you weren't at all attracted to his looks?"

"W-What?" Sayaka blushes.

"I've seen a few pictures of him, from Madoka," Homura tells her. "His looks...hmm... perhaps a little above average?"

Madoka stares at Homura, surprised at her evaluation of Kyousuke's appearance—she didn't even think Homura remembered him.

Sayaka sputters. "Kyousuke—is definitely more than just a little above average!"

"So, you're saying his looks are just as important as to why you fell in love with him?" Homura asks her.

"U-Uh," Sayaka glares at the counter. "Ugh, why am I even answering this?"

"You told me to pretend to care," Homura points out. "This is me, caring."

"W-What do those questions have anything to do with my break up with Kyousuke?!" Sayaka demands.

"Hm." Homura briefly glances away, before she turns back. "Well, for one thing, I don't know you as well as Madoka. I know next to nothing about your relationship with this 'Kyousuke.' I don't even remember his last name. I can't 'pretend' to understand what you're going through, since I know nothing about his importance to you. Therefore, I am trying to paint a bigger picture of how you breaking up with him will affect your life."

Sayaka blinks. "Oh... uhm..."

Homura wants to roll her eyes. Instead she sits up, hands reaching for her water once more. "But the little I do know of you," she says, fingers wrapping around glass, "I believe you will be okay."

Sayaka looks to her in surprise.

"Life is all about experiences," Homura tells her, "and how we learn from them. As they say, 'What doesn't kill us, only makes us stronger.'"

Homura brings the cup close and takes a sip, entirely aware of how Madoka and Sayaka are staring, most likely thinking certain things. She lowers her drink, eyes boring into Sayaka's.

"You, remind me a lot of my brother. You are both annoying, and prone to bouts of loneliness."

Sayaka frowns at this.

"And," Homura continues with a shake of her head. "Like my brother, you are a simpleton. It may take a while for you to recover, and you may try to hide your real feelings behind those horrible fake smiles of yours... but, eventually, you will get over it; it's against your very annoying nature to just sit and mope for too long."

Sayaka's face hovers between confused and angry. It sounds like Homura is trying to comfort her—while at the same time, insulting her.

"Uhm... Uh... thanks... I guess...?"

"Also," Homura adds in, "I believe you are more or less already over him already, if you take into consideration the comments you made at those male models when you were browsing for clothes."

Sayaka's mouth drops open.

Homura's lips twitch in mild amusement. "Though, since you were browsing for clothes for yourself, perhaps they were female...?"

"Y-You! You were awake!?" Sayaka shoots off her chair, intent on wringing her hands around that skinny neck.

Madoka moves to intercept. "Sayaka-chan!"

/

Temperatures are comfortable outside: neither too hot, nor too cold; the temporary lull and a sign that the summer heat will soon be radiating throughout the city, long even after the sun sets.

It's early evening, their footsteps light as they walk to their intended destination, two eagerly, while one still spouts complaints from her lips.

"...I still don't understand why I am being dragged along...?" Homura comments, voice quiet as she continues to brood.

Her mood had dipped considerably when they had decided their plans, made even worse when Sayaka had started digging through the closet to search for an outfit for her once she had flat out told them of her refusal. Sayaka had approached her, threatening to carry her outside if she didn't concede; a memory of Spring Break flashing through her mind, and she had caved in. At least she was given the dignity of deciding her own clothes this time: a thin, purple jacket over a black dress shirt, grey shorts and black tights. And as always, her favourite pair of black boots.

She keeps her hands tucked into her jacket pockets as she continues to follow, fairly reluctantly, down the busy streets of Tokyo.

"Aren't these things better to do with people you are actually close with?" she mutters.

Walking slightly ahead of them, faded blue hoodie and dark jeans wrinkling in certain parts with each step of her bright sneakers, Sayaka glances behind her to glare at Homura. "Stop complaining already! And we're getting dinner afterwards! So it's easier to just have you come along instead of doubling back to pick you up!"

"There are plenty of leftovers at home," Homura tells her, still unconvinced. "Not to mention, I could just meet you two at the restaurant...?"

Madoka turns to Homura, lips jutting out in a pout. Wearing Homura's slightly oversized grey sweater that partially spills over her khaki shorts, and thigh high white socks ending with her usual pink converses, she is ever the picture of innocence.

"Homura-chan, pleaseee? It's more fun with more people!"

Homura sighs. "Madoka—"

Madoka reaches out and grabs Homura's arm, holding it tightly. "Please, Homura-chan?"

She narrows her eyes, before she looks away. "...baby koala."

Madoka blinks. "E-Eh?"

Sayaka hears and laughs loudly.

Homura turns back to Madoka, who's still staring at her with wide eyes. She suddenly thinks of something.

"...If I go, does this mean you forgive me?" Homura asks. At Madoka's blank look, she clarifies. "Uhm. For not telling you about my transplant?"

Madoka shoots her a glare. "Not even close."

Homura sighs.

"But... it's a step towards it," Madoka informs her.

"...We need to get home before 11pm," Homura replies, voice resigned.

Madoka nods, grinning at her victory. "Of course! We probably won't be out that late... it's still pretty early."

"Good, now that that's settled, let's go!" Sayaka shouts, walking faster.

Homura remains at her leisurely pace with Madoka next to her, still clutching her arm tightly.

They watch as Sayaka weaves through the crowds, sneakers stepping with purpose.

Homura glances to Madoka. "Does she even know where it is?"

Madoka frowns. "I'm...not sure."

/

Bright lights, loud noises and a large crowd.

Places that Homura tends to avoid.

Except, she finds herself being lead inside the large glass building, dragged up the stairs by a persistent Madoka.

"I wonder if it'll be busy," Madoka murmurs, arm still looped around Homura's, even after much reassurance that she will not run away.

"Saturday evening? Most likely," Homura replies. She notices that there are more people walking up with them, than down.

As they continue to ascend, Homura wants to sigh as she hears various beeping sounds increasing in volume.

Sayaka is most likely at the top; the brief glances of blue while making their way here at least confirmed that someone who looks like Sayaka was heading in the right direction.

"Doesn't she realize she needs to wait for you, since she has no credits...?" Homura notes, eyes absently reading the random screens deliberately placed on the sides of each step.

"Mm, she's just excited," Madoka tells her. "We didn't get to go last time she visited. The one here is twice the size as the one in Mitakihara, from what I read of the reviews."

Homura turns to her. "Did you go often? Uhm. When you were home?"

Madoka shakes her head. "No, not really. Most of the time, it was me just watching Sayaka-chan play, so we usually went karaoke or did something else. Oh!" her eyes

light up. "But I really liked the UFO catchers there! They always have really cute prizes, and sometimes they get the limited editions first, before anywhere else!"

Homura's lips twitch. "Why am I not surprised that would be your favourite game? Especially when your room at home completely gives that away..."

Madoka sticks out her tongue. "What about you, Homura-chan? Have you ever been to this one?"

Almost to the top, they finally spot Sayaka waiting, sneakers no doubt tapping impatiently for them to arrive.

"No," Homura murmurs. "Game centers are a waste of money."

Madoka frowns. "It's not that much of a waste. It's fun to do stuff like this once in a while! We should come here, just the two of us sometime!"

"I'll pass."

"But—"

Homura sighs. "I'll escort you, since I know you dislike going to places by yourself. But I will mostly be looking."

Madoka grins. "I'm sure you'll find something you'll like!"

As soon as Sayaka sees them, she rushes over. "Come on, Madoka! This place is huge! Let's get some tokens!"

"...Maybe I should transfer some credits over, Sayaka-chan."

/

There's a small line for the token machine, and Homura stands off to the side as Madoka and Sayaka line up.

For a Saturday evening, it's not as crowded as she thought it would be. Then again, she's never really been to a game center.

A glance around and she sees there are different types of people here: couples, groups of friends, lonely gamers. She finds that not every machine is occupied, and there are some that are more popular than others.

One of the far walls is lined completely with racing games, recognized by the steering wheels and large screens that display various race tracks. There's sounds

coming from those machines that remind her of Sayaka, and she sighs when she realizes there's still one more day of her visit.

Maybe she'll sleep in the living room tonight.

Loud cheers are heard from further back, prompting her to crane her neck to locate the source. There are flashing lights that match the beat of loud, thumping music, but she can't see much from where she's standing. After a moment, she decides it has to be some type of rhythm game; she doesn't know, but she doesn't exactly care.

Her eyes continue to look around, bypassing nearby machines with disinterest. All she sees is bright colours and flashing lights; it almost makes her head pound—

A hand on her arm.

She glances over, and Madoka is smiling at her.

"Let's go, Homura-chan!" Madoka says. "Sayaka wants to try the racing games first."

"Alright," she agrees.

She lets Madoka lead the way.

\

Somehow, Sayaka convinces all three of them to compete in a race.

Homura glances to the side: Madoka is to her left, Sayaka is to the left of her, and they're racing with 7 other random people in the arcade.

She chooses the silver car. A quick look at Madoka's screen, who, surprisingly picks purple. She doesn't have to look at Sayaka's to know she has chosen blue.

Madoka catches her gaze, and gives her a grin.

Homura wants to comment on something, but there's a sudden loud voice from the machine.

"*All racers are ready*!"

She turns back to the screen, watching as the perspective changes into first person view as the race track is shown. There's a fake traffic light on the side, glowing red, and the timer starts counting down.

"Homura!" Sayaka shouts at her.

Homura looks over.

"I'm gonna kick your butt!"

Madoka sighs, even with a smile on her lips. "Sayaka-chan gets a bit competitive, Homura-chan. But... I'll try my best and win against you too, Homura-chan!"

"Mm... alright, Madoka," Homura replies, eyes turning back to the screen as the voice yells out 'one.'

"*GO*!"

All ten racers slam their foot on the gas pedal as the race begins.

/

"Gah! I can't believe you two boxed me in!" Sayaka growls as they now stand to the side of the racing machines.

Homura's lips twitch as Madoka gives Sayaka a sheepish smile.

"I-It wasn't deliberate," Madoka tells her, holding out her hands.

Sayaka points an accusing finger at Homura. "Homura's was! She kept crashing into me!"

"You were in the way."

"I would've won if it wasn't for you!"

"Mmhmm."

"I demand a rematch!"

Homura raises an eyebrow at her.

"Yeah! Let's go, Homura! You too, Madoka!"

"Uhm," Madoka glances at Homura who shrugs. "Alright, Sayaka-chan."

They wait, until the current race ends, hopping into the seats when there's enough empty spots to accommodate all three.

"Gonna kick your butt, Homura!"

Homura chooses the black car this time.

And Madoka chooses purple.

Homura leans in closer. "Madoka."

"Hm?"

"We'll team up in this race too, against airplane girl."

Madoka grins at Homura's nickname for Sayaka.

"Hey! I see you two conspiring against me! Doesn't matter! I'm gonna win!"

"*All racers are ready*!"

"Just keep driving, I'll be your backup, Madoka," Homura tells her, eyes now concentrated on the screen.

Madoka glances over at Sayaka. "Alright, Homura-chan. But... I'm not very good."

"You're good enough," Homura murmurs, watching as the timer counts down.

Madoka smiles at the screen. "Sorry, Sayaka-chan."

/

"...your sacrifice was very valiant, Madoka," Homura comments as they watch the replay—and Madoka blushes when the playback changes to slow motion just as her purple car rounds the corner, proceeding to slam into three other cars, throwing them out of bounds and granting them a 3 second penalty each.

Sayaka had unfortunately been one of those three.

She would've won too.

"Madoka!" Sayaka growls.

"I-It was an accident!" she protests.

Homura nods, coming to her defense. "She was at max speed, and didn't apply her brakes in time."

"Whatever!" Sayaka throws her hands up. "One more! Rematch!"

\\

Madoka has her face in her hands, trying to will her blush away.

"...The physics in this game are quite realistic," Homura notes, watching the screen. "I wasn't aware that the cars will catch on fire."

"It wasn't deliberate," Madoka mutters.

"Ugh, Madoka! You are banned from this game! Homura, me and you! One on one! We'll settle this once and for all."

Homura glances at Madoka who gives her a sheepish smile.

"I'll go get more tokens," she volunteers.

"Are you sure?" Homura looks at her, before she looks around; the game center is starting to get rather busy.

"The sooner one of you win, the sooner we can play something else," Madoka tells her with a smile.

Homura debates for a moment, and finally nods. It would save time to have Madoka line up as they still needed to wait their turn as well.

"...Alright. This will be the last race, Miki Sayaka."

Sayaka pumps her fist. "Yup! And without Madoka cheating, I'll definitely win!"

Madoka sticks her tongue out. "I'll go get the tokens. Good luck, Homura-chan!"

"Hey, where's my good luck?" Sayaka demands.

"You just called me a cheater! So I hope Homura-chan kicks your butt!" Madoka says to her, already moving away.

"Traitor!" Sayaka shouts at her back. She turns to Homura who is watching the current race. "You're going down, Homura!"

"I wonder how she managed to get the car to flip over...I would like to try that."

/

Taking a different path, Madoka finds another token machine that's closer.

She takes her place in line, smile still on her lips. She's enjoying this evening, and is eager to rejoin them to try another game.

"Hey, cutie, are you by yourself?"

Madoka blinks at the voice, and turns. There's a guy grinning at her. She looks around in confusion.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you, babe." He winks at her. "What's a pretty little thing like you doing all by yourself? Your boyfriend neglecting you?"

"Uhm." His face doesn't look friendly at all, and his slicked back hair makes Madoka unconsciously steps back, "I-I'm not here by myself...and I don't have a boyfriend."

"Yeah?" He leers. "I don't have a girlfriend either. I think you and me could work well together. You here with some friends?" he gestures behind him, to where two other guys wave at her. "I got some friends with me too. Maybe we could all, you know, work well together."

Madoka glances around nervously, noticing the people surrounding them avoiding her eyes. "Uhm. That's alright. We're fine by ourselves. Thanks for the offer though."

She turns away.

"Hey, don't be like that."

He continues to heckle her, and she tries her best to ignore them.

She sends Homura and Sayaka a message, just in case.

The line continues to move slowly and the couple in front eventually lets her cut ahead.

"Thank you," she tells them, obviously relieved.

"Are you by yourself? There's always guys like that trying to pick up girls here... you should be more careful," the female warns her.

Madoka shakes her head. "No, I'm with some friends. I just volunteered to get some tokens while they're playing."

"That's good," she says, giving the guys a frown. "You should hurry and meet up with them."

Madoka nods. "Yes, of course. Thank you again."

She glances at her phone: no reply. Most likely they're still racing.

Finally, it's Madoka's turn.

She quickly scans the credits, fingers pressing the button as soon as the machine beeps.

There's a rattling sound as the coins fall, and she grabs them, stuffing them into her pockets.

She turns to the couple behind her. "Thank you again."

They nod, giving her a smile.

She waves to them, and hurries back to the racing machines.

Halfway there, there's a sudden hand on her arm—her heart thuds faster as she has an idea of who it is.

"Hey, where you going? You're going to introduce us to your friends, right?" That same voice.

She turns.

That same slicked back hair.

She pulls her arm away, giving him frown. "I said I wasn't interested. Can you please leave me alone?"

"Come on, you haven't even given us a chance," he tells her. "Seriously, I'm a great guy. You'd be lucky to have me as your boyfriend."

"I'm not interested," she repeats, turning to leave.

The hand grabs her again, pulling her towards him. "Hey hey hey. Come on. You're starting to annoy me. I'm giving you a chance here."

She struggles to pull away and his fingers tighten around her arm. Her eyes search for help, finding the game center busy but everyone is occupied; not even a staff member in sight.

Just as she's about to scream, a voice interrupts.

"Madoka, there you are."

That familiar voice.

"Homura-chan!"

"Oh, is this one of your friends?" he whistles in appreciation.

"Is this someone you know, Madoka?" Homura asks her, staring at the beefy hand that's gripping Madoka's arm.

She shakes her head. "N-No!"

"I see." Homura turns to him. "Is there a reason you're holding onto her so tightly?"

He grins. "Well, yeah. We're going to grab some drinks together."

"You do realize she is underage?" Homura comments.

He winks at her. "Well, I won't tell if you won't."

"I see." Homura glances around, eyes suddenly narrowing at something, before she looks up to the ceiling.

Madoka stares at her. "Homura-chan...?"

Homura points to the guys standing behind the one that is holding onto Madoka. "Are you his friends?"

The one in sunglasses grins at her. "Yeah, hot stuff. We'll be yours too."

"Can you stand a bit closer?" Homura asks.

"Sure, I'll stand where ever you want me to, babe."

They crowd in around them.

"How's this?"

Homura doesn't reply, merely turning back to the guy who still has his hand on Madoka's arm. "Can you unhand her?"

He glances over to his friends, grin on his face. "Are you going to come with us for drinks?"

"If you're paying."

Madoka's eyes widen. "Homura-chan!"

He lets go. "Yeah, of course we'll pay! It's the least we could do for a couple of hot babes."

Madoka quickly moves over to Homura. "H-Homura-chan! W-What are you doing!"

Before either of them can react, Homura slams the heel of her boot down onto the first guy's foot.

He gasps in pain.

Homura grinds her heel down harder, causing him to whimper.

His friend tries to step in. "H-Hey!"

"I am this close to breaking your friend's foot," Homura warns him. "Either you three leave, while he can still walk. Or, he will be carried out of here on a stretcher as I call the cops to come arrest you for harassment. So tell me, which would you prefer?"

"What!" Hands reach for her.

Homura slaps their hands away and points up. "There's two security cameras to your right, one in the back, one to your left. From any perspective, you three are surrounding two females. And the longer you stand here, the more attention you are drawing to yourself." For emphasis, she presses harder onto his foot and he groans in pain.

"A-Alright already! We'll leave!" he yells.

She steps back and Madoka quickly latches onto her arm.

"Geez, you're freaking crazy! We just wanted to get some drinks!" he shouts, heavily leaning on his uninjured foot.

"Is there a problem here?" another voice cuts in.

They all turn to see a security guard frowning at them.

"Uh, nope, no problems!" the guys deny, turning to Madoka and Homura. "Right, ladies?"

"They were harassing my friend," Homura replies. She points to the guy she stepped on. "He grabbed her arm and was trying to force her to leave with him."

The guard stares at them. "We don't condone that kind of behavior here." He turns to Madoka. "Did you want to press charges?"

She shakes her head. "N-No. T-That's okay..."

"H-Hey, we were just picking up girls! That's not against the law!"

The guard glares. "You call this a simple 'picking up?' This girl is absolutely terrified of you! It doesn't matter if she doesn't want to press charges; you three are coming with me."

"What!"

The guard presses a button on his headset. "Requesting backup. Location: in front of the Taiko Machines."

"You can't do anything to us! You're not even a real police officer!"

"There's a strict no 'pick up' rule here! Didn't you read the signs!"

All three of them try to make a run for it. The security officer manages to tackle one while another one tries to dart through the crowd, but is suddenly sideswiped by a good Samaritan.

And the last one stumbles as soon as he places weight on his injured foot; there's a reason Homura favours boots over regular sneakers.

Two more security officers appear and they swarm over the other two.

Madoka looks around, suddenly aware of the whispers and attention.

The perpetrators are pulled to their feet and dragged to the security office in the back, onlookers murmuring and turning to watch.

"Are you alright, Madoka?" Homura asks her, reaching for her arm as the crowd starts dispersing.

She nods. "I-I'm okay, Homura-chan. Thank you."

Homura's hands are gentle as she pushes Madoka's sleeve up, exposing the skin underneath. They can see marks from where he had gripped her arm.

"Does it hurt?" Homura asks her, brushing her fingers against the light bruising.

Madoka shakes her head. "N-No, not really."

Homura frowns, and lowers Madoka's sleeve back to its original position. "I apologize Madoka."

"H-Huh?"

"I should have gone with you."

Madoka blinks. "W-What? I-It wasn't your fault, Homura-chan! Plus, I volunteered to get the tokens... who knew they would have those kinds of people here..."

Homura shakes her head. "Game centers are notorious for pick ups...or so I've heard. I'm assuming you never really ran into trouble in Mitakihara?"

"N-No, not really..."

"Tokyo is not like Mitakihara," Homura reminds her. "You need to carry a bit more caution here."

Madoka averts her eyes. "I-I know..."

To her surprise, Homura holds out her hand. "Come on, let's go find Miki Sayaka. We split up to find you."

Madoka looks up, searching Homura's face. She can only see kindness in those lavender eyes.

She reaches for Homura's hand. "T-Thank you, Homura-chan..."

She intertwines their fingers, finally noticing how her own hand is shaking, compared to the steady hold of Homura's.

Without saying anything, Homura tightens her grip. She looks back to Madoka. "Let's go, Madoka."

Finally feeling safe, Madoka smiles to herself. "Okay, Homura-cha**n."**

AN: Y/N? Also, as always, thanks for reading/reviews ! I'll one day learn how to write better. Or disappear. Either, or.

Progress is slow**.**

Feet barely moving and hands still grasped, the further they continue to walk, the more Madoka is starting to notice just how crowded the game center really is.

Homura's trying her best, leading them in between empty gaps and openings, but no matter how hard they try to avoid it, they're still continuously jostled, and bumped.

But, more than the increasingly uncomfortable amount of people surrounding them, more than those indistinguishable murmurs whispering loudly into their ears, the one thing that Madoka is even more aware of, is the feeling of Homura's hand holding hers.

How that slender hand, that usually seems so strong, suddenly seems so fragile at the same time.

Madoka unconsciously tightens her grip, her own fingers pressing against thinner ones. Right on cue, Homura turns back, a silent question asked in those lavender eyes.

It's only really a quick glance, because they can't stop in the middle of this moving crowd, but Madoka smiles, shaking her head, and it's enough that Homura turns away, continuing to push her way forward.

A seemingly barricade of people all around, but they finally reach their destination: the racing games. Homura drags her towards the wall, where they take refuge in a small space wide enough for them to stand in peace amongst the heavy roar of engines.

Madoka watches Homura peer around, eyes obviously searching for someone in the sea of heads and nameless faces.

And suddenly, she leans in close.

"I don't see Miki Sayaka anywhere," Homura murmurs. "This is supposed to be our meeting point. Did she message you, Madoka? Madoka...?"

Still watching, Madoka jumps when she realizes that Homura is talking to her. She stumbles over her feet in her surprise.

Like always, Homura is there, always quick to react. Hand lightly touching her waist, enough pressure to keep her from falling, and then she's pulling away.

"Are you alright?" Homura glances at her, brow furrowed in worry. "Is the crowd too much? Did you need to take a breather outside?"

Her voice remains quiet, and she remains close to be heard.

Madoka shakes her head, cheeks dusted with pink; after that amazing confrontation, Homura also seems even more dashing today.

Though, if she thinks about it, that's just the usual Homura, every day.

"...Madoka?"

"A-Ah," she shakes her head again. "R-Right. Let me check."

She fights down the disappointment when Homura moves her hand away, and instead reaches into her pockets for her phone.

Six messages.

One from Homura, and five from Sayaka; each one slightly more panicked than the previous.

A reply sent, before she turns to Homura, finding her still searching the crowds, eyes no doubt on the lookout for that familiar shade of blue.

Madoka reaches over, fingers grasping the sleeve of her jacket as she tugs lightly, prompting Homura to turn back.

Once again, leaning close.

Fighting down her blush, Madoka informs her where Sayaka has gone. "Sayaka-chan heard about something happening with the security guards. She went to the office to check since I didn't answer."

Homura sighs; she doesn't want to head in that direction any time soon.

As if mocking her, loud cheers erupt from further back.

"There's some... strange contest going on," Homura explains when she sees Madoka looking around in curiosity. "It's a complete bottleneck over there...It's why it took so long to find you."

The phone buzzes in response.

Madoka glances down to check. "...Uhm, Sayaka-chan wants us to meet her by dance games..."

Homura stares. "Let me guess... these dance games are over there?"

More cheers.

Madoka nods, fingers scrolling through the message. "'It's where the loud crowd is, you can't miss it.'"

"I don't understand her reasoning. There's less people in this area. Isn't it easier for her to head in this direction?"

"'And before Homura can ask, they're the reason I wanted to come to the game center in the first place,'" Madoka answers, eyes still reading the screen.

"Maybe we should just leave without her..." Homura mutters.

Madoka finally looks up, catching that small bit of worry in Homura's eyes, before lavender turns away. Madoka watches her closely, and after a moment, she realizes that it's the crowd that Homura's worried about.

Madoka grabs her sleeve again, tugging it to gain her attention.

"I'll go," Madoka tells her when she turns back. "You can wait here, Homura-chan. I'll drop off the tokens, and come back."

Homura frowns. "You already went off on your own once. It's better if we stick together."

"But—"

Homura cuts her off. "It's fine."

They're both now staring at one another.

Madoka looks down to her phone. "...I'll tell Sayaka-chan to come back—"

A hand on her wrist, stopping her.

"It's fine," Homura insists. "Let's just go meet her."

That tone in her voice, tells Madoka that Homura is now completely dead set on the idea.

Madoka remembers those few times they have argued, and knows that Homura is even more stubborn than she is.

"Fine," she sighs out in exasperation, quickly sending out her reply to Sayaka, before tucking her phone away.

Homura nods, withdrawing her hand, but Madoka reaches out, grabbing it.

"There's a lot of people, we might get separated," she explains at Homura's curious gaze.

Another nod.

Homura starts moving, but suddenly turns back.

Madoka watches as her eyes dart to the side, before meeting her stare straight on.

"Make sure not to let go," Homura tells her as Madoka's eyes widen in surprise. "...You might get lost in the crowd, since you're so small."

There's a pause as Madoka processes her words.

Before she punches her hard on the shoulder. "You, are so bad today! You know, if I wore high heels, I could be as tall as you!"

Homura doesn't say anything, but that small smile on her lips tells Madoka exactly what she's thinking.

She punches her again.

"...Ow."

Madoka sticks out her tongue. "You deserved that."

Hand rubbing her shoulder, Homura nods in acceptance. "Alright, let's go find airplane girl."

She starts leading the way through the crowd.

Madoka shakes her head even as her lips tug into a fond smile. She intertwines their fingers, smiling wider when Homura tightens her hold.

/

If the path to the racing machines was considered hectic, further into the game center is utter chaos.

Apparently, a good amount of people knew of this contest, and Sayaka had chosen the perfect weekend to visit.

Madoka is now clutching onto Homura tightly, both of them trying not to get swept away by the ongoing tide of people.

As they slowly follow the crowd, there's a rise in volume to the cheers and music the closer they get to the main attraction. The bass in particular thumps around them, and that constant rhythm is starting to throw Homura off; it feels like her own heart is beating loudly in her chest.

She concentrates on Madoka's hand to keep her own breaths steady.

Somehow, even amongst the flashing lights, and the increasing roar of voices, Homura manages to spot Sayaka.

She's off to the side, leaning against a wall that's across the stage set up for this large contest. Her eyes are concentrated on the giant screen that sits at the back, the display wide enough that even from this distance, Homura has a clear view of the footage shown. It doesn't mean she cares though, and she focuses on more important things: like trying to keep calm to keep her blood pressure in check.

It's an uphill battle. Her annoyance continues to grow with how they can't seem to reach Sayaka despite how close she is. She ignores the gasps of pain when she deliberately throws a few elbows, using unnecessary force after people start stepping on her.

Finally, they manage to join Sayaka in her spot.

Homura struggles to catch her breath as Madoka slips an arm around her waist in worry. She knows Homura won't appreciate nagging words in her ear, and instead turns to Sayaka.

She leans in. "Sayaka-chan!"

Sayaka jumps at her voice. "Hey! Madoka! Are you alright?" She yells to be heard over the crowd. "I saw those punks in the back office, and the security officers told me what happened!"

She quickly checks Madoka over, twisting her around even though Madoka is trying her best to keep her arm around Homura.

"Y-Yeah, I'm okay, Sayaka-chan," Madoka responds, her voice raised for the same reason. "Homura-chan stepped in before anything could happen."

Sayaka nods in approval. She reaches over, suddenly placing her hand atop Homura's head.

Ignoring the narrowed eyes and her hunched posture, Sayaka pats her. "Good girl! You did a good job!"

The first time Sayaka had done this, Homura had slapped her.

This time, she is very lucky Madoka is in the way.

Homura moves, trying to shrug her hand off. "Stop that." She takes a deep breath. "You and that idiot really are alike in the most annoying ways."

Her voice remains quiet, and only Madoka can hear her because she's close enough.

Her annoyed expression though, already tells Sayaka what she said.

Sayaka grins, finally removing her hand. "Hey, I would've been the one saving Madoka, but somehow my 'Madoka senses' aren't as strong as yours!"

Another annoyed sigh, released in a shallow breath. "For the last time, I don't have these ridiculous 'Madoka senses,' you always speak of."

Sayaka looks at Madoka, ignoring Homura. "So we're about to race, right? And then, Homura, suddenly whips out her phone, like she got this second sense that you were in trouble!"

A little calmer now, Homura straightens up. "...the alerts on my phone are set to 5 minutes intervals; I missed the first time Madoka sent her message, but I heard the alert after."

Madoka hugs her close, and lavender flickers to her briefly.

Sayaka suddenly throws a glare over her shoulder at someone who's pushing against her, before turning back. "I have no idea what you're saying, but your 'Madoka senses' were definitely tingling!"

Homura's reply is drowned out by more cheers, and she and Madoka wince at the sound.

When the roars lower, Homura turns to Sayaka.

"Regardless, Madoka is safe, and we have found you. Can we please leave now?" Homura asks, obviously not enjoying the atmosphere at all. "There's no possible way you'll be able to 'dance' with this crowd."

Sayaka stares.

"Homura-chan wants to leave!" Madoka yells out.

Sayaka turns to her. "Madoka, did you manage to get any tokens?"

"Huh?" Madoka blinks. "Y-Yeah. I got like 25 of them, since we burned through them so quickly."

Sayaka nods. "Can I have like, 10?"

One arm still around Homura's waist, Madoka reaches into her pocket, counting off the amount before holding out her hand to give them to her. She nearly loses them when the crowd behind them surges forward. Sayaka barely manages to keep the both of them upright.

Once steadied, and coins accepted, Sayaka grins. "Thanks! I'm going to try and join this contest; there's a regular, free for all, being held alongside the pros, but you need to at least pay the normal amount it takes to play! I just gotta queue up!"

Homura stares. "...With this crowd? Do you know how long that will take?"

Sayaka waves her off, almost smacking some random person in the process. "Whoops! Sorry!"

She turns back to Homura.

"Seriously, I can't hear a word you're saying! Don't you know how to project your voice? Whatever, your face already tells me what you're saying! No worries! I don't need you two to line up with me!" She suddenly leans in close to Madoka, mouth next to her ear, hand cupped in front. "This is the perfect opportunity for you to turn this into a date. Impress her with your amazing UFO catcher skills!"

Madoka flushes as Sayaka pulls away. "W-What?!"

Sayaka points to Homura. "I'm gonna be here, so I expect you to take care of Madoka! You have a set amount of tokens, so at least use them before you decide to leave! I'll join you when I'm done!"

Homura is ready to protest, but she glances to Madoka, and sighs. "...Fine, as long as we aren't anywhere near *here*."

At Sayaka's expectant look, Homura nods, making sure to at least show her annoyance by rolling her eyes.

Sayaka winks at Madoka, giving her a thumbs up. "Go get 'em, baby koala!"

"S-Sayaka-chan!"

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"Are you feeling better now, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, hands now wrapped around Homura's arm.

A brief break after another horrendous trek through the gauntlet of people, they're now in a quieter, and thankfully, emptier part of the arcade.

Absently fidgeting with the water bottle in her hands, Homura nods. "Yes, I am fine now, Madoka."

Madoka guiltily looks down. "I'm sorry, Homura-chan. I know... you didn't really want to come here in the first place...And then there ends up being some kind of contest..."

Homura sighs, shaking her head. "No, it's alright, Madoka. It's fine, and," she gestures around, "it's nicer, here, at least. Seems like everyone is over on the other side."

"I guess everyone knew about it, but us?" Madoka glances around. "You would think there would've been posters or something along the way though..."

Homura blinks. "Ah... That, must have been what that sign was about..."

Madoka turns to her. "Sign?"

"Uhm. On the stairs. Something about, semi-finals, for the Tokyo circuit."

Madoka stares. "...You saw one?"

"...It didn't seem important."

"Homura-chan..."

"...In my defense, there were plenty of strange acronyms that meant nothing to me. And they didn't actually mention the word 'contest.'"

Madoka sighs, tightening her hold on Homura's arm. "You..." she shakes her head, smile on her lips. "Homura-chan, sometimes... you are hopelessly adorable."

Homura's suddenly concentrated on something to the side, and Madoka knows she's embarrassed.

She decides to let her recover, turning to the nearby machines.

Her high pitched squeal startles Homura into almost dropping the bottle, but she's too distracted to notice.

"Oh, they have new Honey Bears!" Madoka gushes, moving quickly, dragging Homura with her to one of the UFO catchers.

"'Honey Bear?'" Homura asks, watching with amusement as Madoka presses her hands to the glass, eyes staring at the prizes.

"Look, Homura-chan!" she points to a rotund bear, yellow in colour, except for the black tipped ears and black stomach. "They stopped making new ones years ago, but I guess they're bringing them back! That one's a new design! They're usually one colour toned!"

A small smile. "...I assume this means you're going to try to win it?"

"Of course! Come on, let's go find someone who works here!" Madoka tells her, hands once against clasping Homura's arm as she drags her away from the machine.

Surprised at her eagerness, Homura merely increases her pace to avoid being pulled along.

"Uhm, why, Madoka?"

Eyes searching, Madoka continues to move around the game floor, steps now filled with purpose. "It's not in a good position. Most of the time, if you ask, they'll help move it so you have a better chance at winning."

Homura blinks. "That's... surprisingly kind of them. Aren't the objectives of those games to trick customers of their money?"

"Mm," Madoka finally spots someone wearing a black and white checkered shirt: the uniform for the staff at this game center. "It still takes some practice and luck to win some of the prizes," she answers, footsteps hurried to snag the worker before someone else.

"I see."

Madoka approaches the worker with a smile on her face. With only a few sentences exchanged, they're making their way back to the machine, Madoka, grinning in obvious anticipation, Homura, trailing after them with a lot less enthusiasm.

It's a quick process, and the bear is easily moved closer to the opening.

As soon as he is done, he's snagged by another couple, but Madoka is already scanning her phone against the machine.

"It doesn't take tokens?" Homura asks, curious.

There's strange music playing, and Madoka now has her hands on the controls. "Nope, it's easier for people to just scan credits, especially considering how much someone can spend on one machine."

The music stops, and the crane hand starts moving as Madoka maneuvers it.

Homura watches closely; she's never really seen one in action before. "I wonder why they don't do the same for the other games. Would save the trouble of having to exchange for tokens."

Madoka tiptoes, turning her head and body, eyes trying to match the position of the claw to the bear.

"Mm, the games use tokens for some sort of retro effect. Kind of like how the coffee shop uses those chalk boards instead of screens. Old game centers used to accept 100yen coins, but since they got rid of the old currency and introduced credits, they switched the machines to tokens instead."

Homura glances at her. "You... know quite a bit about this."

Satisfied with what she sees, Madoka hits the button.

"I did a bit of research in high school," she murmurs. "I was curious too," she gives Homura a quick smile, before turning back to the catcher.

They both watch as the claw slowly lowers, clasps opening at the same time.

It lands directly on top, but when it closes, the hooks are too weak. The bear is nudged slightly, before the catcher returns to its original position.

More music.

Homura gives her a nervous glance. "Uhm. That was close, Madoka..."

Madoka turns to her, smile still on her lips. "That was just a test run, Homura-chan. All the machines, the claws have different strengths, and sometimes they set it weaker or stronger, depending on the time of day. I wanted to see how easy it would be to win."

Homura can only blankly stare.

"This is the real one," Madoka tells her, hands expertly shifting the controls once more.

The click as the button is pressed, and they both watch as the claw lowers, opening right above the bear, before it dives down.

It closes, and as it starts moving back up, to Homura's surprise, one of the hooks snags onto the small tag sewn on one of the bear's legs.

She watches as the claw brings the bear up, still hanging on only by that piece of cloth. There's music playing as the claw returns, and then the prize is dropped into the chute.

Madoka quickly retrieves it.

"It's so cute," she gushes, hugging it tightly. "The eyes, especially!"

She turns it around, showing Homura how they're slanted.

Homura's lips twitch.

/

"Here you go." There's a sticker held out, and Sayaka hastily accepts it. "All signed up. Good luck!"

"Thanks!" She grins, and quickly hops out of the way.

It takes her a moment, after she's once again engulfed by the crowd, to find a spot to stand. She peels back her sticker and with a strong slap, it's placed on her right shoulder.

A glance down: #267.

A confirmation at the score board: #120.

Plenty of time until her turn, but she doesn't mind watching the competition.

Her shoes tap to the beat as she watches the screen.

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One arm holding Homura's, the other looped around her new prize, Madoka grins as they continue their way through the game center.

"Is there anything you want, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, watching as Homura peers at all the machines in clear disinterest.

"Not really," she murmurs.

"We could get Tora-kun a friend," Madoka teases.

Homura glances at her, before quickly looking away.

Madoka bumps her leg with her hip. "Come on, you tease me all the time. And I think it's cute you still have your childhood toy with you."

Homura sighs. "I regret ever showing him to you."

"You didn't exactly 'show' him to me," Madoka tells her. "More like I woke up before you could hide him under your pillow."

Homura doesn't respond, and Madoka knows her enough to know that's her equivalent of pouting.

"Fine," Madoka sighs out. "Is there anything you want to play then? We still have our tokens."

"Hm..." Homura glances around, eyes moving past the UFO catchers, when something catches her attention.

Quick to spot Homura's reaction, Madoka turns to her. "Did you find something?"

"Ah," Homura blinks, and shakes her head. "No."

Madoka stares at her, and turns to where she had last seen Homura looking. "Did you see something over there you wanted?"

Without waiting for her to reply, Madoka moves, dragging her over, until they're in front of another UFO catcher.

She gives her an expectant look. "Homura-chan?"

Homura sighs, raising her hand reluctantly to point at one of the prizes. "Doesn't this remind you of Amy?"

"Hm?" Madoka looks over, and it doesn't take long until she finds exactly what Homura is referring to.

It's a small, black cat plush, complete with a pink collar around its neck.

Homura had met Madoka's cat, Amy, over Spring Break, and that was when Madoka had found out that Homura adored cats.

Madoka smiles, pushing the round bear into Homura's hands. "Here, hold this for a bit, Homura-chan."

She does as told, watching as Madoka pulls out her phone to scan it against the machine. "Madoka?"

Madoka turns to her with a wink. "I don't even need to have them move it for me. These machines are easier to win from, since the prizes are smaller."

One quick catch later, Madoka crouches, hands slipping through the chute opening to retrieve her new prize.

"Here you go, Homura-chan," she says, holding the cat out.

"Uhm," Homura stares.

"It's, a thank you," Madoka tells her, "for saving me, earlier."

Homura hesitantly accepts it, handing her back the bear in the process. "You... didn't have to."

Madoka grins. "I didn't, but I wanted to." Her grin softens into a smile. "Thank you, for coming to my rescue, Homura-chan."

Lavender stares down at the small cat doll now cradled in her hand, before she glances back to Madoka. "It's...Uhm. Y-You're welcome..."

"Mmhmm," Madoka reaches for her arm once more. "Now, let's go play something. Those tokens are worth their weight in gold; we better use them."

"...Alright."

Madoka smiles to herself when she sees Homura tighten her hold on the cat.

/

The more she watches, the more she feels the blood pumping through her veins; it can't be helped, she has always thrived in loud, competitive settings.

Her number isn't getting closer, but she really doesn't mind.

The loud cheers from the crowd fuels her excitement, and there's no way she's bored when some of the players are really flashy, throwing in their own stylized dancing, while still managing to hit those arrows perfectly.

It's been a while since she has last played, but the thought of adaptation, of freestyle, is also exciting.

Her lips move, joining the crowd as they sing to one of the most well known, and popular songs for this game.

"Hey."

The voice in her ear has her screaming. Luckily for her, the crowd is loud enough to drown out her embarrassment.

Though a few observers nearby throw her confused looks.

She turns her head, insult ready at a moment's notice.

"What?" she snaps; this person is completely in her personal space, but they don't seem to care.

"You by yourself?"

She narrows her eyes, taking in the hooded figure, and already knows they mean trouble.

She holds up a fist. "Nope. And you better back off unless you want to meet one of my best friends."

"Hey," hands held out in appeasement, before one hand sweeps back their black hood, revealing a feminine face, sharp eyes, and a devious grin. "I'm not hitting on you, if that's what you're asking."

She straightens out her ponytail of red hair, throwing another grin.

Sayaka stares. "What do you want then?"

Crimson eyes flicker to her shoulder, and the stranger points to the sticker. "267? Most people will be going home by the time you even get your turn."

Sayaka shrugs. "So? This stuff is for fun; it's not like I'm a part of the real circuit."

"That's true," the stranger grins. "But," she leans in close, "you wanna be?"

Sayaka bites down the urge to step back; she won't be intimidated. "What?"

"I need someone for doubles," she tells her, pointing over to the board. "My partner bailed on me."

"...Shouldn't you ask someone else that, I don't know, isn't a random stranger?"

"Nah," she says, hands gesturing as she talks. "You'd be surprised how many people get cold feet with the thought of all those people watching them."

Sayaka sighs. "You don't even know me. What—"

A hand points to the boards. "You see that name there, 'Crimson Devil?'"

Sayaka glances over, eyes completely glossing over the names. "Yeah?"

"No, seriously. Look."

Sayaka sighs, turning her attention to the board. Her eyes widen. "No way is that you."

"Seriously. I just need someone there, standing with me. I'm already a shoe in for finals, but rules state you need two people on the platform, otherwise it's instant disqualification."

Sayaka stares at her.

She leans in close. "Come on, I'll totally make it worth your while."

Something about her voice, has Sayaka gulping nervously.

\

Out of UFO catcher territory, they're now far away from the loud cheers.

They have already tried a rhythm game, one with controls set up to mimic a DJ turntable. Homura had taken over the scratching discs, while Madoka volunteered to be in charge of the buttons.

They had failed horribly after Homura had accidentally hit the randomize switch, and the song had been a five star out of six.

It had ended though, with Homura smiling in amusement, and a flustered Madoka who had been their reason of failure: most of the song required button mashing.

Madoka had punched her arm when she had seen how easy Homura's job had been. "You cheater! You knew!"

Homura had merely turned away, still smiling to herself.

Another rhythm game, this time with a guitar, for revenge.

But to Madoka's frustration, Homura had passed with flying colours.

"Grrr, fine. I get it. You're amazing at music games, while I'm a complete klutz," Madoka grumbles, burying her face into the soft plush.

Homura retrieves her water bottle atop the game station; the cat is tucked safely in her jacket pocket.

"Guess those piano lessons I took when I was younger were good for something," Homura tells her.

Madoka lifts her head. "You took piano?"

"Mmhmm. Until I became too sick."

Madoka drops into silence, once again looping their arms together and clutching the bear close.

Homura senses the mood change, and sighs softly. She quickly glances around, searching for a distraction.

And spots it, across the far wall.

"That looks interesting, Madoka," she says, feet moving and pulling Madoka along with her.

"Eh?"

Homura drags her over, until they stop in front of a row of arcade games that all have one thing in common: plastic guns tucked into metal holsters.

"Shooting games?" Madoka questions, a bit surprised at Homura's interest.

Homura nods, eyes evaluating the screens to determine what kind of settings are in each game.

Madoka tugs at Homura's arm, pulling her away from the next machine. "C-Can we not play that one, Homura-chan?"

There's a sudden growl from the preview, and Madoka jumps in fear.

Homura steers her around, avoiding the next two machines as well. "Zombies aren't real, Madoka."

"I know... but..." She glances back, eyes nervous. "They're still really scary."

"Hm," Homura looks at her, before turning away. "How many tokens do we have left, Madoka?"

Unwilling to let go, Madoka somehow manages to dig through her pockets, squishing the bear against her in the process.

"Uhm," she pulls them out, holding the coins in her open palm.

"10? We only used 5?" Homura asks.

"I think there's still one in my pocket."

Homura stares at the tokens, eyes narrowing. "Alright. I think, I have the perfect strategy."

"Huh?"

Homura nods. "We will find the most expensive shooting game here. And play that one. Do you have any objections, Madoka?"

Madoka blinks, before she sighs.

So much for their date.

But—it's definitely something that Homura would do.

"No. That's... that's fine," she replies, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

Homura is already turning away to find her objective. "I saw an ad, for this ice cream parlour on the 5th floor. Let's go there after we're done. My treat, since you paid for the tokens."

Madoka brightens immediately. "Sure!"

/

"Okay," Sayaka takes a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. "I'm good. I'm fine. This is fine."

Eyes peer at her, eyebrow raised. "You're not gonna chicken out on me, are you?"

Without answering, Sayaka stares at the new sticker now pasted over her old one: Semi-Finals. Team Devil.

They're now backstage, where the higher platform gives her a clear view of the crowd. So many faces.

Playing for fun is one thing; subbing in for someone for semi-finals is *crazy*.

Exhilarating, but crazy.

Oh so crazy.

Her face warps into a grin, and she faces her new partner.

This, is exactly what she needed. Something careless, yet not too much.

She holds up her hand, giving her a thumbs up. "I'm good."

A fanged grin. "Awesome."

\

To Madoka's relief, the most expensive shooting game is not horror based; she doesn't have to worry about screaming every time a zombie pops up.

Instead, they find it at the very end of the row. Madoka had at first confused the game with a photo booth but the label '3d Hunter' and the sounds from within, seemed to state otherwise. When they had lifted the curtain to step inside, they had found out that it was definitely not a photo booth.

It turned out to be a small square shaped room, lined with projection screens on all sides of the walls that extended from floor to ceiling.

They completely enter, and one of the screens is showing the demo.

"It's... almost like a full immersion," Homura murmurs, eyes scanning around.

"Uhm, i-it seems kind of difficult, Homura-chan..." Madoka gulps nervously, watching the instructions.

"But, it's exactly 5 coins per player, Madoka," Homura tells her, pointing to the wall where there's a coin slot.

Madoka glances at the screen, and then back to Homura. "...Are you sure you want to try this one?"

Homura nods.

"...Uhm... Alright. I-I guess, I could try it..."

"We'll have ice cream after, too," Homura reminds her.

The thought of ice cream does at least sound nice.

Her face flushes lightly, when she remembers that Homura tends to split desserts since she can never finish them.

Shared ice cream.

"Ice cream," Madoka repeats, moving to deposit the tokens.

/

The roar of the crowd is near deafening when they step onto the stage.

And all for that one person.

Sayaka glances over, watching as the 'Crimson Devil' waves at her audience, wide grin on her face, eyes almost radiant.

She's definitely enjoying the attention.

She catches Sayaka's gaze, and winks.

It's definitely too loud to hear what she's saying, but Sayaka's pretty sure her lips read, 'Good luck.'

She turns away, face suddenly warm.

Because she did not just think what she did, about this 'Crimson Devil.'

\

They're still stuck at the weapon screen, held back because Madoka continues to waver between her choices.

"Uhm... I'm... I don't know which one I should choose, Homura-chan..." She looks over to Homura's screen, and sees that she has chosen dual pistols. "Should I choose the same...?"

Homura is concentrated on another screen, reading the individual descriptions for each weapon as there is nothing else to do until Madoka finally decides.

"Anything should be fine, Madoka," she murmurs. She points to the screen, "Look, they say machine guns are good for beginners, since it has automatic firing, and the amount of ammunition makes it so that you don't need to reload as often."

Madoka stares, and Homura already knows she's not going to choose it.

"Mm... let's see," Homura says instead, continuing to thumb through the selection. She pauses, noticing another tab for 'Additional Weapons' that she hadn't noticed the first run through.

Curious, she pushes it, and another screen opens, this time with archaic looking weapons.

"How about these, Madoka?" she asks, gesturing to the new selection.

Madoka looks, but none of them catch her attention. Swords, spears, and even a very old styled musket.

Homura continues browsing, when Madoka holds out her hand.

"Go back!"

Homura toggles to the previous, and Madoka points.

"Maybe that...?"

Homura nods. "It's the first weapon that actually caught your attention. And as there's," she looks to another screen, "two minutes left to decide, I believe you should go with that, Madoka."

Madoka suddenly glances down, to the bear still held in her hands. She had refused to place it on the floor next to the bottle since it would get dirty, but there's no way she's going to be able to play, while holding onto this thing.

Homura turns, and sees Madoka biting her lip, staring down at that ridiculously round bear in her arms.

"Madoka."

She looks up. "Hm?"

Homura pulls out the cat plush from her jacket, and holds it out. "Here, we'll trade." She gestures to the cat. "You can hold Amy—"

"Amy?" Madoka asks, smiling.

Homura quickly glances away, cheeks suddenly stained with light pink. "I-It's a temporary name. You... You can hold this cat—"

"I can hold Amy," Madoka teases, still smiling.

"...You can hold this, and I'll take that bear of yours. You'll have more trouble using your weapon while holding that, than I will."

Madoka glances down, and then back to the screen; she'll need her arms free for the pull back, according to the instructions.

Another beep.

One minute left.

She nods. "Alright, I'll hold Amy," Homura bites back a sigh at this, "and you can hold... Homu-chan."

Homura blinks. "...What?"

This time it's Madoka's turn to blush, eyes shy, arms holding the bear close. "H-Her name is Homu-chan. She looks... like a Homu-chan."

There's only silence between them, and suddenly a voice from the game interrupts.

"*45 seconds until we begin! All players, please ready your selection!*"

Homura turns back to her, and gestures to the cat. "Alright. You can hold Amy, and I'll hold... Homu-chan."

Madoka nods, grinning, and they exchange their plushies.

The screen is starting the count down now, and Madoka glances over, resisting the urge to take out her phone.

Because Homura, holding that bear, looks absolutely adorabl**e.**

AN: Kyouko would *have* to be introduced in a game center. But, this story is mainly Mado/Homu, as are most(ALL) of my stories. :)

Thanks again for reading/reviewing! And I don't dislike when people point out errors or give criticisms, as long as they describe it in detail so I know exactly what you mean, whatever it is. It gives me food for thought on how I can improve. Thanks again!

She's rusty.

That's all she can think as the final note fades away—not that she can hear it as it's drowned out by the crowd as they cheer.

It's been too long, and she doesn't recognize some of the songs.

And, it was just her luck that the first one, had to be one of those she doesn't know.

She glances over, to where the Crimson Devil looks just as cool and composed as when they had first stepped on stage.

It's a three song semi-final.

And the first is over.

When she turns to the scoreboard, she's not surprised to see that they're ranked lowest of the 10 semi-finalists.

Because of her.

She exhales a puff of breath into her bangs, and slaps her cheeks with her hands.

There's an arm slipped around her shoulders, and she turns to see the Crimson Devil, all but breathing down her neck to be heard over the loud crowd.

"Relax, alright? I didn't expect much from you, anyways. You're doing pretty good for a novice. Just leave everything to me; keep doing what you're doing: standing there, looking pretty."

Three emotions cycle past: embarrassment, disappointment, and the last one, has Sayaka shoving her new partner away as she growls in anger.

She watches as the Crimson Devil catches her balance, and that arrogant grin only fuels the fire.

Blue eyes narrow.

There's a thumbs up as a response, and they both turn back to the screen as the announcer and crowd counts down to the next song.

One last look at her partner, and she resolves to wipe that smirk off her face.

The thumping bass starts alongside a synthesizer—and the second song begins.

/

They're in a long corridor, stainless steel lining the walls, the floors laid out in a pattern of multi-coloured tiles. The open ceiling, or maybe it's the sky, is a nauseating blend of colours with numerous staircases spiraling above. Looking up makes Homura dizzy, and Madoka is the one keeping an eye out for any enemies that may appear overhead.

Visibility is decent in this section, though, for some reason, the scenery is splashed in a light sepia toned filter. That, had taken them some time to get used to.

Homura glances over to Madoka, who has her face tilted up.

Those pink eyes widen, and Homura watches as she lifts her bow with one hand, the other stringing back an arrow.

A quick release, and the squeak tells Homura that whatever Madoka had spotted, is now dead.

Lowering her weapon, Madoka notices her watching, and gives her a smile.

It's only because Homura can see Amy nestled in Madoka's arm, that she remembers they're still playing a game.

"Homura, Madoka." The cute, high-pitched voice of their guide calls out to them, and they both turn.

He is strange creature, with a white, furry body in the general shape of a cat, but ears abnormally long, ending with jagged, pink coloured fur.

The way his beady red eyes stare makes Homura's skin crawl. "There are 3 minutes left. You two need to find the next section, otherwise you will be lost, and trapped in this maze forever."

Madoka suddenly presses herself against Homura. "He's creepy, isn't he, Homura-chan?"

Homura nods. "Very."

"He's convenient though," Madoka says, looking around. "We haven't seen any other creatures in a while, minus the flying ones. Do you think we went the wrong way?"

"Hm. I'm not sure," Homura murmurs.

Lavender roves around for clues, one arm hugging the encumbering round bear tightly, both hands holding a gun each.

There are no indicators, and she shrugs.

"Let's just continue this way," Homura tells her. "I don't think we have enough time to turn back..."

"Okay."

They continue walking down the corridor, footsteps echoing in their ears as they move forward.

"This game is kind of fun, huh, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, voice quiet as she keeps glancing behind, and then up, making sure there are no creatures trailing after them.

Homura pauses in her steps as she thinks of a response. "It's... interesting. Very realistic, especially the way it's set up to overload your senses. Not to mention the holographic weapons are amazing. It's a very sophisticated simulation, considering it's a game. I wouldn't be surprised if they used this technology in the military for combat training..."

Madoka hums; if Homura had that much to say about it, it meant she was enjoying it enough.

Just as Madoka glances back once more, she spots a yellow box on the ground they had missed earlier. "There's something over there, Homura-chan. I think they're bullets...?"

"Hm?" Homura follows her gaze. Madoka is right, they are bullets. But— "Those won't fit my gun. I can only use bullets in green boxes, remember?"

Madoka frowns. "Why do we keep finding things we can't use?"

"Most likely there's some algorithm used to randomize items," Homura answers absently. They're approaching a corner, and those are the best places for ambushes. "At some point," she murmurs, raising her gun, "we'll probably find additional weapons along the way."

There's something peeking out at the edge of the wall. Homura aims her gun, waiting until she can see a bit more of it before she pulls the trigger.

There's a small squeak, and when Homura walks over, the cotton ball fluff she had shot, is already fading away.

She rounds the corner and quickly scans the new area: it's still a corridor, but this time, there are roses sprouting out of the walls, and the floors look almost like an overgrown garden.

She glances to their guide, and finds the timer has reset, signaling that they are on the right path.

"I think we're going the right way, Madoka," Homura says, bringing up her gun as she spots more cotton ball fluffs with large moustaches hopping down the new hallway.

Madoka quickly joins Homura's side. A brief check on the situation, before she turns around to face the path they had come from. She finds more cotton fluffs, these ones armed with scissors, now blocking their exit.

The rapid bullets from Homura's gun, and the tortured squeaks following those, tells her that Homura is dealing with her enemies.

Not to be outdone, Madoka concentrates on her own fight.

Her bow is pointed towards the closest creature as an arrow is nocked back, and then quickly released. A small squeak, and she moves on to the next one, repeating the process as each cotton ball continues to fall.

When the last one is squeaks, Madoka lowers her bow. Just as she's about to breathe out a sigh of relief, she's pushed out of the way.

She turns in surprise as a giant fireball smokes past, dissipating harmlessly into gray wisps as it hits the wall. Homura is suddenly there beside her, dual guns raised to the sky. There's four sparks of light as four bullets are fired, followed by that telltale squeak. Madoka looks up, just in time to see another one of those winged creatures in the act of disappearing; if she had remained standing there, the fireball would have hit her straight on.

"Sneaky things," Homura mumbles, quickly looking away from the nauseating sky. She closes her eyes briefly, trying to regain her bearings. "Sorry about pushing you, Madoka," she murmurs, eyes finally opening when the room stops moving.

Madoka shakes her head. "No, that was my fault. I was supposed to keep an eye out."

She reaches over, and gives Homura a hug.

"Madoka...?"

Still holding on, Madoka grins. "Thank you, Homura-chan. You've saved me lots today."

Something about the way Madoka is looking at her, makes Homura blush. "U-Uhm. It was, just really good timing... about the fireball..."

"Not just that, silly. Earlier—"

"Homura! Madoka!" That same high pitched voice. "I sense the Witch! If you continue down this corridor, it will lead you straight to her!"

"Uhm. W-We should continue moving, Madoka," Homura tells her.

Madoka sighs. "We should..." She reluctantly pulls away.

Homura starts walking down the corridor, but Madoka hangs back as she checks herself over for the upcoming battle. She's not in perfect health, but not too bad, with enough magic left to cast a few more spells.

"...Madoka?"

Homura is waiting, and she moves to catch up.

Her eyes narrow when she looks Homura over. "...Are you cheating, Homura-chan?"

Homura glances to her. "What?"

"You have more HP than I do! And more magic!"

Homura blinks. "Well, the magic part... your arrows consume a bit each time you shoot, while my guns use regular bullets."

"...Cheating."

"You do more damage, and you don't need to reload," Homura tells her dryly. "As for the HP..." She gives Madoka a pointed expression. "Did you forget how you rushed into that room earlier to pick up that box...?"

Madoka opens her mouth, and suddenly gives her a sheepish smile. "Oh, yeah. I thought the room was empty..."

Homura merely readjusts the bear in her grip.

"Homura! Madoka! I sense the Witch! If you continue down this corridor, it will lead you straight to her!"

Homura throws the white creature a glare, before she turns back to Madoka. "Are you ready, Madoka?"

Madoka nods. "Mmhmm. Ready whenever you are, Homura-chan."

\\

Two down, one to go.

The adrenaline is now pumping through her veins.

That, had gone a lot better.

She cracks her shoulders to loosen up her joints.

She's slightly out of breath, and her hoodie definitely feels too warm.

But—

She eyes the scoreboard; there's a surge of pride when she sees that they're no longer in last place.

There's no way they're going to be in the top five, but if they do well on the last song, they can still somehow slide up at least two spots—that is, if her calculations are correct.

She crosses her fingers, hoping the last on the list is one she knows.

There's a wide smirk when the first three bars of the song plays.

All she hears is the music now, eyes already concentrating on the screen, anticipating the arrows as they appear once the beat picks up.

It's a fast pace song—and though it really has been a bit too long since she has played, there's no way she could forget this one.

She and her partner are mirroring each other's movements: a hop to the left, a quick slide to the right. A succession of left and down arrows hit perfectly as they march in place.

This time, she's toe to toe with the Crimson Devil.

She jumps to the right as her partner jumps to the left.

They're facing each other, eyes no longer looking at the screen.

A step forward, a step back. She counters the Crimson Devil's twisting freestyle with her own.

She sees an eyebrow quirk up, that grin again, and a challenge issued in those eyes.

Sayaka smirks and nods. She counts off the beats in her head: one, two—

She leaps diagonally, landing on the up arrow of the other dance pad, switching sides with the Crimson Devil who lands on hers.

More fast steps, a spin to the left, a spin to the right; the crowd roars when she suddenly throws out an aerial cartwheel, landing on the down arrow with perfect timing.

Another pause in the song where they switch back.

She pivots on her foot, the up arrow pressed before she hops back into the center.

She can't help but grin when she hears those high notes, signaling the song is reaching the end.

It's the grand finale—and her pride is definitely on the line.

Two moves left.

One: her right arm swings down, placed onto the right arrow as her legs are kicked up for a one-handed handstand. Two: her other hand is planted down firmly, and she lowers her body, rolling into a somersault. Just as the song ends, she bounces to her feet, landing on the left arrow as the word 'perfect' flashes on the screen.

It's a definite crowd-pleaser and this time, she knows that some of those cheers are for her.

There's a familiar weight around her shoulders, and she's turned so that she's facing their audience.

The Crimson Devil is beside her, grinning widely, and she can't help but grin back.

Her eyes flickers to the scoreboards—6th place.

Not bad.

/

Hand raised, Homura lifts the curtain, allowing Madoka to pass by her as they exit the booth.

Reentry into the game center is a bit jarring after experiencing all of that in real-time, and it takes them a moment to readjust.

Madoka clutches Homu-chan tightly, giving Homura nervous glances.

Her face gives nothing away, but Madoka knows she's upset.

"Uhm... I-It was a lucky shot, Homura-chan... Y-You were the one that did most of the damage towards the end..." Madoka says, trying to comfort her.

Homura shrugs as her eyes casts a look around. There's a bit more activity on the floor now, meaning that the main dance competition must be close to ending.

Where that left Sayaka though, is anyone's guess.

A hand is grasping the sleeve of her jacket, and Homura turns to see Madoka looking at her, worry etched across her face.

"Homura-chan, I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take the last hit for the kill... I mean, it's not like—"

Homura sighs, interrupting her. She reaches out her own hand to awkwardly pat Madoka's. "It's fine, Madoka. I'm not upset about that."

Madoka doesn't believe her. She tightens her hold around Homura's jacket, unwilling to let go.

Her pouting face is enough for Homura to finally crack a small smile.

She sighs again. "Alright. Maybe I was a little upset." Madoka looks at her, and she glances away. "But, more at my own carelessness. I didn't pace my magic use properly and thought I'd have enough to dodge that building. I can't believe I got clipped by it..."

Homura's furrowed brow tells Madoka that she's most likely still thinking about it.

Her hand moves, and she links arms with Homura instead.

"We definitely wouldn't have won if it wasn't for you though." Madoka smiles when Homura finally turns to her. "But... are you sure you've never played before, Homura-chan?"

"Hm?"

"Don't give me that look! For someone who doesn't really play games, you did really, really well! You pretty much predicted where to go, and it was almost scary how fast you figured out how to solve the puzzles." Madoka narrows her eyes. "Is there something you're not telling me, Homura-chan?"

Homura raises an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"Like, maybe you're hiding how much of a gamer you are," Madoka tells her. "And how, instead of going to your classes, you come to the game center to get your gaming fix. Maybe the mysterious initials for first place, 'T.M.' is really you. And—"

"Madoka." There's exasperation in Homura's voice, offset by the tinge of amusement.

Madoka looks over, smiling when she sees Homura looking more relaxed. "Really though, it's... surprising that you like shooting games. I can see you playing puzzle games more. Maybe something like 'Puyo puyo.'"

"'Puyo puyo?'"

Madoka laughs at Homura's expression. "It's... a matching game, kind of. But with these really cute blobs."

Homura merely nods.

"I'll show you later. Maybe we'll unlock that secret gamer inside you," Madoka teases.

Homura hums, stepping back and moving Madoka with her to let someone else enter the booth. "Well, regardless, you still managed to avenge me against this 'Walpurgisnacht.' And, judging by that fight, you saving me from her triumphs over anything I did. So, oh fearless hero, what would you like as your reward?"

Madoka blinks. "W-What?"

Homura tilts her head. "Isn't that how games usually work? The hero gets a reward for defeating the final boss?"

Madoka fights down her blush, eyes quickly looking away as various 'rewards' she wouldn't mind receiving from Homura flutter in her mind.

Homura eyes her curiously. "Well, you'll have to do with ice cream for now then," she says, tugging Madoka along as they start heading towards the exit.

Madoka stops suddenly, dragging her feet. When Homura turns back, she sees her shyly fidgeting with Homu-chan.

"Madoka?"

"...Are you really serious, Homura-chan? About the reward?"

"...Uhm. Sure."

Madoka glances up. "C-Can it be anything?" she asks quietly.

"Well," Homura briefly thinks about it. She shrugs. "Anything within reason, and please, nothing over 5000yen..."

Homura is already turning away, but Madoka tugs on her arm, prompting her to look back. "Uhm. I-Is there a time limit? Can I save it, for later...?"

"You, and your time limits... That's... fine," Homura tells her. "But, don't expect to bring this up a year later..."

Madoka grins. She starts leading the way, pulling Homura along. "Let's go get some ice cream, Homura-chan!"

"...Alright."

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Her eyes are narrowed "...This is what you consider 'making it worth my while?'"

Mouth full, the Crimson Devil bobs her head up and down. Another cheese covered fry is picked up, quickly joining the others in her mouth.

More chewing, followed by a swallow, before she finally shoots Sayaka a grin. "Are you kidding me? This place has the best cheese fries in Tokyo!"

At Sayaka's unamused expression, the Crimson Devil sits back. She glances down to the fries, hands reaching, but spots a glob of cheese on her fingers. She absently licks it away, eyes staring off into the distance as she calculates something in her head.

She sighs. "Fine, you did save my butt after all. But, I won't be able to pay you until next week anyways. I'm a bit tapped out at the moment."

Sayaka blinks. "What?"

"5%—and only because you stepped it up towards the end with that flashy move. Nice, by the way."

She's back to the fries, but Sayaka still has no idea what she's talking about.

"What?" she repeats.

An eyebrow raised. "Nuh uh. No way am I raising it any higher."

Sayaka's no closer to understanding, and holds out a hand. "What," she bites out, "as in, '*what* are you talking about?' And," she points to the basket of fries that are almost gone, "didn't you buy those for me? Because I ate like, one."

A menu screen is slid in front of her as an answer. "Order something then. I'll pay for that."

Sayaka watches as the rest of the fries disappear, and she can't help but eye her companion. "Where does that even go?"

With her black hooded jacket now draped over one of the empty chairs next to them, Sayaka can see that the Crimson Devil's figure is lean. And, judging by the bit of muscle she can see on her arms, her body is no doubt toned under that aqua coloured t-shirt of hers.

Her eyes continue down, and she quickly glances away when she finds her gaze lingering a bit too long at the tanned skin on her exposed legs; those black shorts are definitely a bit *too* short.

Thankfully, it goes unnoticed as crimson eyes are concentrated on another menu. "Fast metabolism," she replies. A finger selects a few dishes, and finally she glances up. "Anyways, I was talking about the pot."

"Pot...?"

"Yeah, pot. You know, for winning the circuit."

Sayaka blinks. "Oh. I didn't know there were actually prizes for that."

Eyes narrow. "You... are either trying to pull something past me, or, you really don't know what I'm talking about."

Sayaka ignores her and turns to the menu; she's starting to get hungry after all that excitement. "So, what, you get a couple thousand yen? Credits to the game center? A trophy?"

There's a low whistle. "Wow. You really don't know anything about this, do you? Geez, have you been living under a rock for the past few years, or what?"

Something about her tone grates on Sayaka's nerves. "Yeah, well, some people actually have real lives, instead of hanging out at game centers all the time, dancing to win consolation prizes."

Her stomach grumbles. She decides on a meal with fries, a burger, and a milkshake. Once the order is sent to the kitchens, she sets the menu down.

She turns her attention back to the Crimson Devil, who's now grinning at her.

"Okay, well, the business part of me, really wants to not tell you. But, there's no way I'm going to let your earlier comment slide." She sits back, arms crossed. "You think I would do this for chump change? For a couple thousand yen? Some stupid trophy?" She leans forward. "Try a couple *million*."

Sayaka's glad she's not drinking anything—because she would definitely have done a large spit take at that revelation. "...What?"

A finger taps onto the table surface. "The grand prize for this circuit is 3 million yen. Still think I'm wasting my time, hanging out at game centers?"

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The ice cream parlour is slightly crowded when they arrive, but that is mostly due to its size.

There's only 6 small tables inside, along with a long bar that faces the windows. All six stools for that are occupied, but they manage to snag a table as a few customers leave a few minutes later.

And, as Madoka sits, waiting for Homura to place their order, she's slowly becoming aware of how this small establishment is filled mostly with couples.

She hugs Homu-chan tighter, and glances over to where Homura is standing in line. She's staring straight ahead, face ever serious and looking like the mysterious beauty that always turns a few heads; Madoka knows this fact very well.

As if sensing her gaze, Homura turns, and tilts her head when she notices Madoka staring.

Madoka gives her a smile, and raises Homu-chan slightly, her one hand moving the small stub as if the bear was actually waving.

She sees Homura's lips twitch, but then she's turning away again as the customer in front finishes placing their order.

Madoka sighs softly, eyes glancing down to the round bear in her arms.

She's still staring, and more or less zoned out, when there's the sound of a chair scratching against the white tiled floor. She looks up as Homura settles into the seat across.

"There's only one employee working in the back, which is why it's taking so long." Homura tells her. "They said it will probably take around ten minutes for them to bring out our order."

Madoka shakes her head. "That's fine. It'll make it more delicious because we had to wait."

Homura pauses at her words. She nods slowly. "Yes, of course. How could I forgot that 'Madokaism,'" she says as her hand slips the receipt into her jacket pocket.

Madoka gives her a puzzled expression. "'Madokaism?'"

Homura nods again. "'Madokaisms,'" she explains, "things that 'Kaname Madoka' lives by. Such as, how waiting for something, particularly food, will somehow make the experience even more enjoyable."

The dry delivery of Homura's words has Madoka sticking out her tongue.

Homura appears thoughtful. "Hm. Actually, calling them the 'Law of Cycles' sounds even better. Makes it sound more real."

Madoka pouts. "You make it seem like I'm some type of religion or something."

Homura smiles lightly. "Only some people can join though. It's very specific, and there are some height limitations..."

Madoka suddenly holds out her hand in front of Homura. "Let me see Amy, Homura-chan."

"What?"

Madoka gestures, and wordlessly, the plush is pulled out and then placed onto her outstretched palm even as Homura continues giving her a confused look.

"Amy," Madoka says as she places Amy atop Homu-chan. "Homura-chan is being mean. Maybe it's better if you remain mine instead; you don't want that grumpy, meanie to be your owner, do you?"

Homura watches as Madoka moves Amy's head, as if the cat is shaking her head.

Madoka smiles. "Guess that settles it then."

Homura blinks. "...Settles what?"

"Amy would rather stay with me."

"...?"

"And," Madoka leans down, ear held towards the cat plush even as she keeps her eyes on Homura. "She also says, that I shouldn't count today as a step towards forgiveness for your lies about your heart transplant."

Homura gives her a nervous glance. "Wait. W-What?"

Madoka remains quiet, now playing with Homu-chan and Amy. She's deliberately letting Homura sweat it out a bit.

"...Madoka?"

She finally glances up, trying her best to hide her grin. "Yes, Homura-chan?"

"Uhm. Y-You're not really mad, are you? I-It was a joke—I apologize," Homura murmurs, voice low and very serious. She places her hands on the table, automatically linking her fingers together out of habit. "I'll stop bringing up your height—I promise. I know you're sensitive to it—and, I might have overstepped my bound—"

Madoka sighs, and merely reaches over and grabs Homura's hands. She gently pries Homura's fingers apart, depositing Amy back into her open palms once that's done. "I was kidding, Homura-chan."

Homura stares as she closes her fingers around the plush. "Uhm. Which part?"

Madoka gives her a smile. "Both. Amy is yours—I gave her to you, so you better take care of her. And... well, the game center was pretty fun. Minus those creeps at the beginning."

Homura hesitates, but when Madoka nods, she slips Amy back into her pocket. Her eyes glance away, before they finally land once more on Madoka.

"I apologize though, Madoka. About making fun of your height all the time. It's..." Homura frowns. "Sorry."

It reminds Madoka, of the Homura during the early stages of their tentative friendship: quick to apologize, and so adorably awkward.

Not that she still isn't awkward or adorable, but they've come a long way since then.

At least, Madoka hopes so.

She shakes her head. "No. I don't really mind, Homura-chan. I... like it when you joke around. You're usually so serious with everyone else..."

"...Even if it's at your expense?"

Here, Madoka smiles. "Well, okay. I admit, I do hate it when people like to point out that they're taller than me—which was horrible in middle school, by the way! But... I mean, I know you really don't mean anything by it. And..." she shyly looks down. "I like how you're more relaxed around me... it makes me feel like I know a different side to you than what everyone else knows." She looks back up.

Homura blinks as she tries to decipher Madoka's words and that accompanying expression on her face.

Before she can form a response, there's a light clatter on the table. They both turn to the waiter who bows at them.

"Your large, strawberry and vanilla sundae," he tells them. "Thank you for waiting! Please enjoy." A few napkins are slid besides the dessert, with two long spoons placed on top of those.

"Thank you," Madoka murmurs.

He nods, and heads back to his station.

Whatever atmosphere they had is now broken, and Homura nervously clears her throat. "Uhm. L-Looks pretty good. It's... more than I thought it would be though."

Madoka sighs softly. She shakes her head, a fond smile on her lips.

Her hands reach over for a spoon as Homura brings the sundae closer.

Just as Madoka's about to dig in, Homura stops her. "...Maybe it would be better if I held your bear for you, Madoka."

Madoka glances down to Homu-chan, and then over to the sundae that is covered with chocolate sauce and whipped cream.

"...Alright," she agrees.

She passes Homu-chan over, and when Homura settles the round bear into her arms, the ice cream is forgotten as Madoka quickly digs through her pockets for her phone.

"Homura-chan! Say cheese!" Madoka tells her.

The picture clicks just as Homura gives her a startled expression; she had assumed Madoka would be taking a picture of her food, not of herself.

"Madoka?"

Madoka grins. "Bring Amy out too, Homura-chan."

"...Your ice cream is melting, Madoka."

"Hurry up then, Homura-chan. Bring Amy out so I can finish taking a picture, and then we can eat!"

Thoroughly confused, Homura does as told, placing Amy atop Homu-chan's head like what Madoka had done earlier.

Madoka pouts as Homura's usual blank face stares at her from her screen. "Smile, Homura-chan."

"...I am, Madoka," Homura replies, even as her face remains passive. "You can't see it, but on the inside, I'm smiling."

Madoka sighs at her sarcasm, and merely clicks the shutter button. A picture with Homura holding Homu-chan with Amy is good enough. She shouldn't be too greedy.

And she's definitely not going to waste her reward on something like this.

"...Can I put Amy away now, Madoka?" Homura asks.

Madoka nods, eyes shining as she smiles to the picture in her phone. "Yup, all done."

Amy is once again safely tucked away.

Homura glances over. "Madoka, since your phone is out, you should message Miki Sayaka; I highly doubt it, but perhaps she's done already. Hopefully..."

"Sure." Madoka types out a quick message, slipping the phone into her pocket once its sent. "Alright. Now, it's time for ice cream! You're eating too, right, Homura-chan?"

Homura shakes her head. "No, I bought that for you."

Madoka takes the first bite, shivering slightly as the cold from the dessert seeps into her mouth.

"Mm, this is really good though," she mumbles. With her other hand, she reaches to the side. The second spoon is brought closer and slid in front of Homura. "Trrylslhome," she tells her, spoon hanging from her mouth, slurring her words together.

At Madoka's insistence, Homura eventually caves in. She finds a small bit of vanilla ice cream that's not drowning in chocolate, and carefully brings the spoon to her mouth.

"Take more, Homura-chan," Madoka says as she scoops a large spoonful for herself. "This is too much for me—" noticing Homura's skeptical gaze, "yes, even for me. Plus, dinner is soon. So please, help me finish this, Homura-chan."

She sees Homura look across to the cashier area, to where there's a digital clock hanging on the wall.

Dinner, maybe in an hour, depending solely on their wayward 'dancer.'

Homura nods. "Alright..."

Madoka smiles at her victory, and brings the large spoonful of ice cream into her mouth. She shivers again, eyes closing from the sudden coldness.

"You should really take smaller bites, Madoka... Though, it is still amusing to watch."

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"Okay, okay! I get it. It's super important, and you guys got like sponsors and everything! What I still don't get, is why would your partner bail on you if the prize money is *that much*?" Sayaka asks, before she finally takes a bite of her burger.

Her companion shrugs. "Well, bailed, might've been a very simple way of putting it." There's a second basket of cheese fries, and those are disappearing just as fast.

Mid-chew, Sayaka lifts an eyebrow.

The Crimson Devil rolls her eyes. "Well... let's just say, the idiot twisted his ankle."

Sayaka gives her a sympathetic look as she swallows her food. "Ouch. That's pretty bad timing..."

"Yep. You're telling me. Well, at least it worked out for you. If you continue to do what you did during the last song for next week's competition, we can definitely place. First might be impossible, but third would be better than nothing..."

Sayaka lowers her burger onto the plate. "Uh... next week?"

The Crimson Devil eyes her. "Yeah. For Finals. It's what comes after semi-finals. What, you gonna bail on me, too?"

Just as Sayaka's about to comment, there's a chime from her phone. "Give me a second..."

It's a message from Madoka.

She feels guilty for eating without them—but when she sees the attached picture with Homura sitting in front of a large sundae, that feeling vanishes.

She still wants ice cream, and this watered down milkshake isn't cutting it.

A message sent explaining her situation, and then her phone is pocketed.

When she turns back, the Crimson Devil is still staring.

Sayaka gives her a sheepish smile. "Uh, funny thing you know, I... don't exactly live here."

A raised eyebrow. "Yeah? Where you from?"

"Mitakihara."

Both eyebrows raise in surprise. "Seriously? I'm from Kazamino, and I know someone from Mitakihara. What are you doing all the way here if you didn't even know about this dance circuit?"

Sayaka rolls her eyes. "There are things other than dance competitions, you know. But, I'm just visiting a friend."

"Yeah? ...You think she'd be interested in competing?"

Sayaka smirks. "Madoka? Yeah... good luck with that..."

"Man, just my luck. I find a replacement who doesn't even live here..."

Sayaka watches as she starts eating her burger, looking a lot less happy about it even though the food is disappearing just as fast.

She suddenly feels bad, for letting this person down. "Uh... you know. Maybe... I could make it for next week."

And just like that, that grin falls back into place. "Really? You're not pulling my leg, are you? Because if you are, you better tell me now, so I can find someone else to take your place."

Sayaka tries to remember her schedule. There isn't anything important, other than her math test.

"Yeah," she tells her. "I can definitely make it next week."

"Awesome." A fist is held out. "Put 'er there, partner."

Sayaka grins, and bumps her fist. "Yeah. I was thinking, you know, since you're the 'Crimson Devil,' I should make up a nickname too. Something like, I don't know, what do you think about 'Azure Knight?'"

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"... I think I ate too much," Madoka says as she hugs Homu-chan tightly.

Hand lightly on Madoka's waist, Homura guides her out of the flow of foot traffic, and over to the wall. "I told you not to try and finish it."

"Mmmm... but it was so good..." Madoka murmurs, closing her eyes as she leans against Homura's shoulder.

"And you must be feeling really 'good' right now," Homura tells her dryly.

Eyes still closed, Madoka pouts, pressing herself closer against Homura. "It's because you didn't help me eat it, Homura-chan."

"I ate more than my fair share."

"You ate like four spoonfuls..."

"Which is more than what I usually eat."

Madoka remains quiet because they both know that's true. Their conversation lapses into comfortable silence, and when her eyes finally open, she's greeted with the sight of Homura's profile, eyes staring off into the distance at something in front of them. Curiosity peaked, Madoka turns to the direction of Homura's gaze. They're on the fifth floor of the building, but it's high enough for them to see some of the city skyline through the glass windows. The city lights twinkle, lit up now that the sun has set.

"They kind of remind me of stars," Madoka comments softly.

Homura glances over to her. "Well, it's the closest thing to stars we can get here; the light pollution and smog drowns out the real ones."

Madoka nods. "Yeah, but if we just travel an hour away, we'll be able to see them..."

Homura hums in agreement.

They continue watching the skyline for a moment, ignoring the people that walk past.

Madoka tilts her face up, glancing to the dark skies. "...Homura-chan?"

"Hm?"

"This summer... do you... want to take a trip somewhere?"

Homura turns to her. "You're not going home?"

"Maybe only for a week, or two. I might take some extra classes. You're going to be working, right?"

Homura nods. "Yes."

"I-It could be an overnight trip. Something not too expensive, or too far away... Maybe to a hot spring or something..."

Homura gives her a small smile. "Maybe to some place where we can see the stars?"

Madoka shyly looks away. "U-Uhm, but, I know you'll be busy, and—"

"I don't mind, Madoka."

Madoka can't fight down her smile. "R-Really?" she asks, turning to Homura for confirmation.

Homura nods. "I have a bit extra saved up. We'll figure out our schedules, and work out places to go later."

Madoka grins, hugging her and Homu-chan close.

Noticing her sudden rise in mood, Homura looks at her. "Are you feeling better now, Madoka?"

"Yes!" she gushes. The thought of going on a trip with Homura is enough for her to ignore her protesting stomach. "A lot better."

"We should get going and meet up with Miki Sayaka then. Who knows what kinds of trouble she's getting herself into, especially with this 'Crimson Devil' character."

Madoka gives her a grin. "Are you worried about Sayaka-chan, Homura-chan?"

"Not in particular," Homura replies. "But, if something happens to her, we'll be the ones dealing with the aftermath..."

Madoka frowns. "You don't think she met some weirdo, do you?"

"The name does strike me as a bit odd..." Homura murmurs. "It could either be someone religious, or someone who's into satanic worshiping... Why 'Crimson Devil?' in particular? Doesn't this person have a real name...?"

Suddenly worried, Madoka tugs Homura forward, hurrying her along as they walk towards the stairs to meet with Sayak**a.**

AN: Just a bit busy at the moment, so there won't be a cat's cradle update, or anything else, really, until the end of next week...? Hopefully. Just in case anyone's wondering (but who issssss?)

This chapter was so difficult to write, goodness.

Thank you again, for reading/reviewing! Kyouko seems to be a favourite in this fandom...?!

I... should make one of those blog things so people can ask questions, and I can actually answer them... Nah. I'm too lazy for that :)

"...Are you sure this is the right place, Madoka?"

The first time Homura had asked, it had been cute.

The second time, a little bit less.

The third...

Madoka shifts Homu-chan to her other arm and proceeds to dig out her phone from her pockets. A few seconds later, she holds it up and shows Homura the text from Sayaka.

"Mmhmm. Says so right here, Homura-chan."

She watches as lavender flickers over to the sign, then back to her phone.

Homura finally sighs in defeat. "Alright, I agree, the name is the same."

Madoka nods. She locks the screen before she tucks her phone away. "Let's go inside."

She pulls Homura with her, adding a bit more strength when she feels her dragging her feet.

"Homura-chan."

Homura's eyes narrow as she peers through the glass. "...Why would anyone eat at a bowling alley?"

The automatic doors slide open as Madoka brings them closer, and the sound of crackling thunder immediately echoes in their ears.

"Sometimes they have a pretty good snack bar," Madoka murmurs, quickly scanning the establishment as they enter.

Fluorescent lights are overhead, bright enough that it makes their eyes squint momentarily as they adjust. A row of short circular racks are to their right, filled with sets of different coloured bowling balls. There's empty space past that, opening up to a seating area, where each lane has their own table with surrounding chairs placed right before the actual bowling section. Signs to their left point to the entrance of the bathrooms through a hallway, and further down, there's a small line of waiting customers by the register.

"I don't think they're actually bowling though," Madoka comments, moving Homura aside when she notices other people trickling in.

She looks around, eyes searching for that familiar shade of blue. At least half the lanes are occupied, but she doesn't spot Sayaka anywhere.

"I don't see her, do you, Homura-chan?" Madoka turns to find Homura staring distractedly at something.

She's watching as a bowler takes his turn, cradling a black bowling ball in his gloved hand. A brief moment as he looks to the center, and then three steps as his arm swings back, followed by a quick release with a flick of his hand as he brings his arm forward.

The ball starts right at the edge of the lane, reaching halfway when it suddenly curves left and careens down the middle.

"Ahh... that was close." Madoka winces in sympathy at the one pin still standing.

Homura jumps. "Y-Yes, it was..."

Madoka eyes her curiously. "Do you like bowling, Homura-chan?" Judging by her earlier reaction, she's thinking no.

Homura shrugs. "I don't know. I have never really tried."

"Eh?"

Homura merely starts moving to continue their search, but she finds it difficult with Madoka's feet suddenly planted firmly into the carpeted floors.

"Madoka?"

"You've... never bowled before, Homura-chan?"

She watches as Homura reaches behind to fidget with her hair; another nervous habit of hers.

"I was busy," Homura finally answers. "And after that..." she glances away, "...it didn't seem like something fun to do by myself."

Madoka holds her arm tighter, squishing the bear in her other arm in the process. "...Guess you're finally getting your chance, Homura-chan."

Homura blinks. "Madoka?"

A smile as her reply, and suddenly she's following after Madoka as she's pulled over to the registers.

/

She steps through the parting double doors, one bright sneaker lifted, quickly followed by another as the tiled ground transitions into padded flooring. The quiet restaurant is suddenly transformed into loud laughter, the slight murmur of a crowd, and to continuous rattling sounds of synthetic plastic colliding with wood.

She continues on in, eyes searching, and finally, she realizes the numbers printed on the walls are in ascending order. She walks down the length of the floor, lips moving as she counts off.

25...26...27.

She stops when she sees the one marked 28.

A small smirk as she spots her best friend and her crush standing in front of their lane. Judging by the gestures and animated movements, it appears as if Madoka is teaching Homura how to bowl.

A loud yawn heard behind her, and Sayaka turns to see the Crimson Devil with her arms raised above her as she stretches. There's a peek of skin as her shirt lifts with her movements, and Sayaka quickly glances away.

For some reason, her eyes seem to wander too much, especially when it involves *her*.

"You find your friend?"

Sayaka quickly composes herself with a light cough. "Yeah." She points right in front. "See that idiot couple right there?"

Crimson looks, and they both watch as the shorter of the two continues to flounder about with her explanations.

"Uh huh. Well, let's go join them." Without waiting for her to reply, she walks over, and Sayaka can only follow.

They both drop into the accommodated chairs for their lane, Sayaka taking the one next to a round ball of fluff with a plush cat draped over its head. Its sitting on top of a handkerchief, most likely Homura's, judging by the colour. On closer inspection, she realizes it's a bear, and recognizes it as one of the characters that Madoka used to love back in middle school.

A fond smile as it stirs up brief memories, before Sayaks turns her attention back towards the lanes; it seems the lesson is over and Homura's finally going to take her turn.

Madoka steps back, remaining out of danger, yet close enough for support.

Sayaka eyes are suddenly mischievous as her lips tug into a smirk. Homura is far from flawless, and she doesn't mind adding another item to her list of things that she can tease her with.

Homura's posture is stiff, and even though they're staring at her back, there's no doubt that she's concentrating in front.

A full minute passes, and at least three other bowlers in the adjacent lanes have already gone. Just as Sayaka finally sees Homura's leg moving, a voice shouts out.

"Just throw the damn ball already!"

Homura promptly stumbles, barely managing to keep from dropping the ball. She turns around as Madoka does the same.

They face the Crimson Devil as she stands. "It's like watching paint dry!"

Madoka opens her mouth to respond, but she spots the sitting Sayaka. "Sayaka-chan!"

Sayaka waves, and rises to her feet. She pauses, and turns. "Uh, hey, what's your real name?"

A fanged smirk. "You're asking that now?"

"It kind of slipped my mind..."

Madoka and Homura have moved closer to greet them, one with a nervous smile, the other with eyes ever wary as she grips the bowling ball tightly.

A slightly tanned hand is suddenly held out in front of Madoka. "Yo. Sakura Kyouko, at your service. You can call me Kyouko, or 'Crimson Devil.'"

Despite the roughness Kyouko seems to exude, Madoka's smile warps into a friendly one. "Kaname Madoka. You can call me Madoka."

If Madoka's surprised by the less than traditional greeting, her face doesn't show it. They exchange a firm handshake, and then Kyouko turns her attention to Homura.

"Yo."

It's only because Madoka gently elbows her that Homura reluctantly accepts the outstretched hand. "...Akemi Homura. 'Crimson Devil' is an interesting moniker," she says as she moves her hand away.

Kyouko grins. "Yeah. Thanks."

"I was a bit worried," Homura tells her as her eyes flicker over to Sayaka, "that Miki Sayaka had met someone strange, but you seem normal enough. At least," she briefly glances down, "there's no visible markings of Satanic worship on your body."

Sayaka frowns. "Hey."

Madoka quickly tries to step in. "Homura-chan."

Kyouko smirks, and holds out her arms; her jacket is tied to her waist and her skin is exposed. "Not where you can see, at least. But there's no guarantee there's nothing under here." She suddenly leans forward, eyebrow quirked. "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours."

Homura doesn't back down, lavender staring into crimson long enough that Madoka feels jealousy trickling in.

Just as Sayaka is about to interrupt, Kyouko suddenly straightens up. "You've got a pretty good poker face."

Homura nods slowly. "It goes great with my gambling addiction..."

Before either of them can react, Kyouko is grinning as she throws her arm around Homura's shoulder. "You, are probably a riot at parties."

Homura tries to shrug her off, but finds that near impossible, especially with one hand still gripping the bowling ball. Whatever she mumbles under her breath has Kyouko laughing.

Finally, she relinquishes her hold, and Homura stumbles away.

Despite the rocky start, Sayaka feels a grin on her lips in response to Homura's wary expression.

Perhaps, this new friendship with Kyouko will be better than planned.

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"Homura-chan?"

Madoka's voice pulls her from her thoughts. She glances over to the screen.

They're playing in teams, her and Madoka, versus Sayaka and Kyouko.

'Team Pink' versus 'Team Red.'

She sighs.

Madoka takes her reaction as a response to the score. "We can still catch up, Homura-chan! You're doing really well for your first time!"

Homura stands, taking a moment to readjust her shirt and jacket. "I'm doing horribly, but thank you, Madoka."

Out of the two, she's the obvious weakest link on their team, but it's not because she doesn't understand what she should be doing.

She's stubborn though, stuck on trying to curve the ball like the other bowlers in the adjacent lanes.

She approaches the ball return, eyes easily picking out the brightly coloured one that she's using. It's light in her hands as she walks over, shoes sliding slightly on the polished surface of the lane.

A deep breath for focus as the ball is held out in front. She ignores the sounds around her, and waits until the bowler in the next lane takes his turn.

After a brief confirmation that everything is clear, she finally moves, feet stepping forward as her arm swings back. She stops before the foul line, arm now extended in front for the release. Her wrist is deliberately turned as the ball leaves her grip.

She straightens up, staring as it rolls down the lane and starts hooking slightly to the left.

And like always, it keeps to the side instead of curving more to the middle. A sigh of disappointment as those same three pins that she seems to favour, fall.

3 in this frame.

3 in the last.

She frowns, watching as the metal bar sweeps the fallen pins away. She ignores a loud comment from a certain redhead, rolling her eyes at her brashness.

She waits a few more seconds, before she turns around to retrieve the returned ball. She can't help but glance over to the seating area, where Madoka

immediately catches her eye and gives her an encouraging smile. Homura pauses in her steps as she briefly thinks how that round bear sitting next to Madoka resembles a bowling ball.

The ear bumps and those stumps of appendages would definitely get in the way though.

Knowing Madoka is still watching, she gives her a small smile—anything less would have her worrying she's not having 'fun,' before that brightly coloured ball is in her hands once more.

A different strategy this time: she decides she'll stand more to the left, rather than throw it from the center.

The curve brings the ball right down the middle, and all but one pin is knocked down—her best hit yet.

Madoka is cheering, loudly enough that Homura fights down her blush as she returns to take a seat.

Madoka only makes it worse as she hops out of her chair to intercept her with a hug. "You did it, Homura-chan! One more and you would've gotten a spare! See, I knew you could do it!"

She nods, cheeks lightly dusted with pink as she forces a real smile down.

Kyouko walks past and claps a hand heavily onto her shoulder. "Nice. Maybe we'll be able to get a real competition going now." She suddenly stops, and faces them. "Hey, how 'bout, we make this a little bit more fun?"

Madoka finally pulls away from Homura to blink at Kyouko. "More fun?"

A grin in response. "Yeah. Like, you know, make things more exciting. We're in teams already, aren't we? So... why don't we place a little bet?"

Sayaka joins their little circle when Kyouko waves her over. "What's up?"

Madoka looks at her. "Uhm, Kyouko-chan wants to place a bet...?"

Kyouko nods. "Just something simple. Like, loser pays for dinner, or something."

Sayaka pats her full stomach. "...We just ate."

"Fast metabolism, remember?" Kyouko turns to Homura and Madoka. "What do you say? There's three frames left for this game. We can start with the next one."

"Uhm..." Madoka glances over to Homura. "W-Well, but... I mean, it's Homura-chan's first time bowling...?"

Kyouko raises an eyebrow. "Guess it's your call then, Sunshine." She gestures to the screen. "If you keep doing what you did right now, you could potentially win."

Homura bites back a sigh at her nickname and looks to their scores. Despite her bravado, Kyouko is currently third, but she's merely a few points behind Madoka. Sayaka is currently in the lead, and she's not surprised to find herself dead last.

"Come on," Kyouko insists, "don't tell me you're chickening out in front of your girlfriend?"

Homura blinks. "...Girlfriend?"

Kyouko nods to Madoka who suddenly jumps.

"E-Eh?!"

Sayaka bites her lip, trying to keep her laughter down.

Madoka quickly shakes her head, cheeks now stained the same colour as her hair. "W-We're not g-girlfriends!" she denies, waving her hands in front of her. "N-Not that there's anything wrong with that," she says, looking over to Homura. "I-I mean, i-it's perfectly normal, and it's not like—it's not like I'd be offended if you were my g-girlfriend, Homura-chan! I mean, it's—"

Homura places a hand on her arm. "It's fine, Madoka. I know you didn't mean anything by that. Calm down."

Madoka can feel her head spinning from the rush of blood. She bows her head. "U-Uh huh..."

Sayaka steps in, hand cupped in front of her mouth as she leans towards Kyouko's ear. She whispers something before she pulls away.

Kyouko merely smirks at her words. "I see... alright. Okay, so, don't tell me, you're chickening out in front of your girlfriend?"

To Madoka's embarrassment and quickened heartbeat, Homura doesn't bother denying it.

"As far as I can see, there's no real reason to make this more 'exciting,'" Homura replies, not at all rising to the bait.

Kyouko sighs. "I get it, you just want to bowl for fun. It's your first time, so you know you're not gonna win."

Homura shrugs.

Kyouko turns to Madoka instead. "You sure you wanna stay with that stick in the mud? I'll definitely keep you on your toes," a devious smirk, "if you know what I mean."

There's suddenly an arm held out in front of her, and she finds Homura glaring. "It's your turn. You're holding up the line."

Kyouko throws up her hands. "Alright, alright. No need to get jealous."

She's grinning as she finally makes her way over to the ball return.

Hoping to diffuse the situation, Madoka grabs Homura by the arm and pulls her to the seats.

"Kyouko-chan's... Uhm, interesting, right, Homura-chan?" Madoka says as they sit down.

Homura leans back against the chair, her eyes narrowed as she watches Kyouko take her turn. "Interesting, is putting it lightly, Madoka."

Sayaka settles in besides them. "Just admit you're scared of losing, Homura."

Homura shakes her head. "I'm not afraid of losing. But what would be the point of taking a bet I wouldn't be able to win? At this moment, 'Team Red' is currently in the lead, and I can't say for certain I'll be consistent with my throws for the next game." She glances to Sayaka. "You should be careful of her, Miki Sayaka. Perhaps, 'Crimson Devil' is more than just a made up nickname."

Sayaka frowns, but before she can ask her what she means, Kyouko finishes the frame with a spare and a grin.

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"Are you feeling better now, Homura-chan?"

Even with her eyes closed, she knows that Madoka is hovering nearby. Her eyes open, and sure enough, Madoka is there, peering at her with worry etched across her face.

"...Yes." She takes another sip of water, using it to swallow down the lingering dizziness that had suddenly appeared out of thin air. "I'm okay now, Madoka. Thank you. Uhm, I apologize... for making you worry..."

Lack of sleep is definitely affecting her health, and she fully blames Sayaka and her rather impromptu her visit.

A hand against her cheek, and her eyes focus on warm pink. "What are you apologizing for? If anything, it should be me. You should've said something if you weren't feeling well."

"I'm fine," Homura murmurs even as her eyes close again.

Suddenly, the pressure against her cheek is gone. The empty cup is plucked from her fingers, and she hears the soft hollow sound as it's discarded into the nearby trashcan.

A moment later, she feels something brush back her bangs with a gentle touch.

"I don't think you have a fever, which is good. We should call it a night, though. If you're up to moving, I'll call the taxi and have it drop us off at home."

"I'm alright." Homura's eyes open once more, this time to Madoka frowning. "The water and the fresh air helped. Not to mention, we already started on the next game... they're not going to issue a refund."

Madoka knows about Homura's stubbornness firsthand, and merely takes a seat next to her.

They're outside, taking a breather on the large balcony located right by the bowling alley. Simple round tables with matching chairs are scattered around, and it's close enough to dinner time that it hadn't been hard for them to claim one.

The afternoon heat has yet to fully dissipate, though it's a bit cooler than when they had first set out a few hours ago. Madoka leans over, resting her shoulder against Homura's. The light from the nearby lamp post blends their shadows together, casting a darkened silhouette against the cement floor.

Madoka reaches down and links her fingers with Homura's.

"I don't care about wasting money, Homura-chan. If you're feeling sick, tell me you're feeling sick. Stop being stubborn. You're more important than some silly game."

Homura sighs. The feel of Madoka's hand resting in hers though, is comforting. Her fingers curl in. "...I am feeling a bit tired."

Madoka smiles in triumph. "See, that wasn't that hard to admit, was it?"

Homura shakes her head. "But, I'm still feeling well enough to bowl."

Madoka exhales a puff of breath in exasperation. "Fine. We'll finish the game, and see how you feel afterwards."

Homura nods. "Thank you."

"...We should head back inside," Madoka murmurs softly, even as she makes no effort to move.

"Mmhmm..."

They remain sitting in silence, content with each other's presence.

Just as Madoka is about to force herself to stand, Homura turns to her.

"Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"...What do you think of the Crimson Devil?"

Madoka blinks. "Kyouko-chan? Uhm." She looks across, to the city lights glowing in the distance. "She's nice, I think. And Sayaka-chan seems to like her, at least."

"She does. But," Homura moves her head to follow her gaze, "I take Miki Sayaka's judge of character with a grain of salt..."

"Homura-chan." Disapproval in Madoka's voice, before it tempers into curiosity. "Why do you ask? Do you not like Kyouko-chan?"

"... She is interesting. 'Crimson Devil...'"

"You seem to like her nickname though?" Madoka teases. "Do you want your own? You could be... uhm... 'Purple...'" she frowns. "Uhm... what's something that's purple?"

"...I'm sure there are better things, but for some reason I can only think of eggplant."

Madoka grins. "'Purple Eggplant!'"

"...Madoka." Homura turns to face her again. "I apologize. I'll be busy this summer, so we won't be able to go on our trip."

The smile immediately drops from Madoka's face. "What?"

"Since you figured out my identity, I should tell you the truth. I need to prepare for Obon." Homura closes her eyes, unable to keep a straight face if she looks at her. "It's an important time during the summer, what with all those dead ancestors coming back to visit. I'm in charge of their return ride and—"

Madoka finally realizes that Homura is struggling to hold back her smile. She responds by smacking her on the arm.

"...Ow." Homura's eyes open as her lips twitch in amusement.

Madoka huffs. "You're probably going to be busy during New Year's too, right? Showing up in everyone's dreams for good luck?"

"Don't worry, I'll be sure to visit yours too."

A thought passes through Madoka's mind, and she quickly glances away before Homura can see her blush.

"You would be 'Pink something,'" Homura says as she lifts her hand, finger suddenly poking one of the small pigtails in Madoka's hair. "Though, these little things here, have always reminded me of rabbit ears. So... 'Pink Bunny.'"

Madoka finally turns back with her tongue sticking out. "It's still better than 'Purple Eggplant!'"

Homura nods. "I agree. We should head back in though."

Madoka sighs. "Alright. You must be feeling better if you're able to tease me."

She moves over, her own arm looping around Homura's waist to help her up.

"I'm fine now, Madoka," Homura tells her as she feels Madoka press in close.

"Just in case."

Homura doesn't bother saying anything, merely accepting her words and letting her do what she wants.

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When they return to the bowling alley, they find Sayaka standing awkwardly to the side. Kyouko is there, by the seats, looking less than amused as another female around their age seems to be staring her down.

Homura is still leaning against Madoka when they approach.

"Sayaka-chan?"

Madoka's voice has her turning around.

"Hey, took you two long enough." Sayaka glances to Homura. "Everything alright there?"

"Yes, I am fine."

"Cool. Good to know." Her attention turns back to the now frowning redhead.

Curiosity peaked, Madoka looks over. "Uhm, who is that, Sayaka-chan?"

"No idea," Sayaka murmurs, still distracted. "She kind of just came out of nowhere and started yelling at Kyouko."

"They obviously know each other," Homura comments lightly as she evaluates the stranger's appearance.

Her black heels sets her at the same height as Kyouko, though her style of dress is very different: a gray cardigan worn over a light blue blouse, paired with a semi-long, dark blue summer skirt.

Her long blonde hair tied into a side ponytail contrasts sharply against that messy red hair; they look as different as night and day.

"Maybe she's her girlfriend," Homura decides after a moment.

It's a reference to Kyouko's earlier words, but when Homura sees Sayaka stiffen rather visibly, she tilts her head.

Just as she's about to test her theory, Kyouko suddenly throws up her arms in frustration.

They watch as she says a few choice words, face scowling, before that expression wipes clean as she spots the three of them staring from afar. Her hand latches onto the blonde's arm, and then they're both walking over to join them.

"Hey. You two finally back? Should've just said something if you wanted some alone time." Kyouko waggles her eyebrows and gives them a knowing smirk.

Homura ignores her, while Madoka fights down her blush.

"Kyouko! Can you please unhand me?" They all turn to the blonde who straightens when she realizes there's an audience.

Kyouko lets her go with a sigh. "This is... my friend."

A slight frown mars the blonde's face at her introduction. It turns into a polite smile though, as she bows lightly. "Tomoe Mami. Pleased to meet you."

Madoka is the first to recover and she pulls away from Homura to return the bow. "Nice to meet you. I'm Kaname Madoka. You can call me Madoka."

They exchange friendly smiles.

Madoka glances to Homura who makes no effort to introduce herself. She nudges her with her elbow.

"...Akemi Homura."

Sayaka rolls her eyes. She steps forward with a wink. "Miki Sayaka! Sayaka is fine. Don't mind Homura over here; she's only nice to girls with pink hair."

Madoka throws Sayaka a glare who pretends not to notice.

"Alright, now get out of here already." Kyouko makes a shooing gesture with her hand. "We're kind of in the middle of something."

Mami pats down her skirt, hands brushing invisible specks of dust away. She ignores Kyouko and turns to the other three. "I know, this may seem rude and like a strange question, but, Kyouko didn't somehow blackmail you girls or anything, did she...?"

"Mami!" Kyouko growls and reaches for her shoulder.

"Did she take anything from you? Your phones? Purses? Wallets?" Mami continues as she stands firm against Kyouko's grabby hands.

Madoka blinks. She exchanges nervous glances with Sayaka and Homura. "Uhm, w-we're just bowling, Tomoe-san."

Mami smiles. "Please, you can call me Mami." Not even bothering to look behind her, she skillfully slaps Kyouko's hands away.

"Ow!"

The smile remains on Mami's face. "Well, that's good then, that you are just enjoying her company." Her golden eyes narrow slightly as she looks over to Kyouko. "And hopefully, it will remain that way."

Kyouko grumbles under her breath. She suddenly jabs a finger at Mami. "You know, if only you had just agreed to be my partner, but noooo, you complain about how—"

Mami is still smiling as she turns to Kyouko. "Hm? Did you say something, Kyouko?"

Something that Kyouko only sees has her quickly shaking her head.

Mami gives her a pointed nod. "Well, now that I know you're not in trouble, I'll leave you be. I trust you won't try anything on these girls?"

"Yes, *mom*."

Mami shakes her head with a sigh. "Since you obviously won't be joining me for dinner, I need to go find something to eat." She bows to the other three who have remained quiet during their exchange. "I'm really sorry for bothering you. Please ignore what I asked you earlier, it was just a little joke. It was nice meeting you."

She bows once more, before she starts walking away.

As she passes by, Madoka suddenly calls out to her. "Uhm, Tomoe-san?"

Mami stops in her tracks and turns around. "Yes?"

Madoka bites her lip. She looks to Homura.

She shrugs. "I don't really care."

Madoka brightens, and gives Homura a half hug.

Mami is still waiting, and she turns back to her. "Uhm, that is... would you like to join us? T-That is, if you're not busy, I mean...? There's a snack bar you can order from if you're hungry. And," she glances over to Homura again, who nods, "we'll be getting dinner after this... so...?"

Mami can only stare at her in surprise.

Madoka smiles in encouragement. "It's uhm, like they say, the more the merrier!"

No one can deny how Mami's eyes seem to light up as she turns to face Kyouko.

Kyouko sighs. "Whatever. It's their call. I kind of just crashed their little party myself."

Mami places a hand to her chin. "I mean... I wouldn't want to impose..."

Sayaka ignores how her stomach seems to be churning with jealousy. "Really, it's okay!" she chimes in. "None of us mind."

Mami lowers her hand. "Well, that is..."

Madoka nods and gives her another friendly smile.

It's enough to crumble the last of Mami's resolve and she responds with an even brighter smile.

"I mean, if no one minds... Thank you."

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"It's fine, she can take my place."

Madoka looks to Homura, suddenly worried. "You're not feeling dizzy again, are you, Homura-chan?"

She shakes her head. "I'm fine."

"But it wouldn't be right of me to take your spot, Akemi-san," Mami insists. "I'm perfectly fine with watching."

"Yeah." Kyouko gestures impatiently. "Now that that's settled, can I go now?" She lifts the bowling ball in her hands, deliberately holding it so they can see.

"Wait!" Madoka calls out. "Uhm, why don't you take my spot instead, Mami-san?" At Homura's gaze, she explains. "I mean, the whole reason we're bowling is because you have never been bowling before, Homura-chan!"

"I already played one game, Madoka."

Madoka frowns. "One game isn't enough to experience it!"

"I'm pretty sure I already understand that I'm bad at it," Homura responds dryly.

"Homu—"

"Okay, okay!" Sayaka holds out her hands, but she steps back when four sets of eyes turn to her. "Uh... why don't we just add Mami-san to the game? Like, not play teams, but just do individual scoring?"

"That's what I said!" Kyouko shouts in annoyance. "But then Mami keeps trying to not step on anyone's toes, while dark and broody over here keeps trying to bail out!"

Homura points to herself for confirmation of the new nickname, but Kyouko doesn't see as she whirls around to face the bowling pins.

"Whatever! You guys better decide by the time I finish my frame!" True to her word, she strides down the lane with the bowling ball in hand.

The remaining four glance around.

"...We'll just lose the teams then," Homura tells them with a sigh.

Madoka nods and stands before Mami can reply. "That's fine. I'll be right back!" She hurriedly makes a bee-line for the register.

Mami suddenly hops to her feet. "Wait, Kaname-san! I will pay for myself!" Even with her heels, she's quickly catching up to Madoka as they head to the counter.

Sayaka drops down into the chair Madoka had abandoned, half squishing Homu-chan in process and knocking Amy over.

Just as she's about to move them aside, Homura slaps her hand away.

"Ow! Hey! What's the big idea?"

Homura points to the bowling balls. "Your hands are dirty. If you want to touch them, go wash your hands first."

Sayaka scowls. "As if the arcade itself was very clean. As if the chairs are clean!"

Homura merely nods. "Which is why they're sitting on my handkerchief. They'll need to be surface wiped later, but no point in dirtying them even more."

She uses the inside portion of her jacket to carefully move the round bear next to her, before she fixes Amy back into place on its head.

Sayaka decides to leave it alone instead of arguing. She turns, just in time to see Kyouko throw a gutter ball as she ends her turn.

When Kyouko walks back, she takes one look at the smirking Sayaka and growls.

"It slipped, okay! It accidentally hit my leg!"

Sayaka raises an eyebrow. "Which was it? Did it slip? Or did it hit your leg?"

"Both!"

Sayaka grins and stands to her feet. "Let me show you how it's done, 'Crimson Devil.'" She takes deliberate steps towards the lane, though when she glances over her shoulder, she's disappointed to find that Kyouko is talking to Homura.

Her earlier bravado deflates, and she walks a lot less enthusiastically.

Kyouko taps on Homura's leg to gain her attention. "Okay, so, now that we're getting rid of teams, do you want to try another bet?"

Homura is watching a bowler two lanes over and frowns even though she isn't facing her. "...Perhaps you are the one with the gambling addiction."

Kyouko throws her arm against the back of the chairs. "Eh, it's just boring, playing for fun. I need something more exciting. Something to get my blood pumping."

Homura finally turns to her. "I believe you are in the wrong place if you are looking for excitement in a bowling alley..."

Kyouko shrugs. "They got the best cheese fries in Tokyo." Her eyes suddenly light up. "Wait, now that Mami is here..."

Homura watches as she reaches for the menus on the nearby table.

"You should order something too," Kyouko says as she hands her one of the screens. "That's probably why you were feeling dizzy. If I'm hungry I always feel kind of light headed myself. I recommend the cheese fries."

"'Wow, Sayaka! You got a strike! You're amazing!'"

They both turn as Sayaka slides into the seat next to Kyouko.

"I could totally smoke you in pool," Kyouko grumbles after she double checks the score: Sayaka is definitely in the lead now.

"Uh huh..."

Homura ignores their bickering, instead concentrating on the menu as they still needed to wait for Madoka to return.

She is starting to feel a bit hungry, and browses for something light to eat. The prices makes her pause, and her finger hovers over her potential selection as she debates.

There's two beeps nearby, and she glances over to see Kyouko's queue of fries and a slice of pizza on her screen.

Kyouko throws her a grin. "You can try some."

The thought of more greasy food sends her finger down, and when she looks up, she finds Kyouko scowling.

"Rabbit food? Seriously? You're ordering a salad? Don't tell me, you're one of those skinny girls who always think they need to be on a diet?"

Kyouko looks absolutely offended, and Homura blinks at her reaction.

"We had pizza earlier. I need to offset the salt intake," she explains, though she's not sure why. At Kyouko's expression, she adds in a bit more. "It's not good for my blood pressure."

Kyouko stares. "Huh." She looks away, brow furrowed lightly. "You sick, or something?"

"...Or something."

"I see."

Another strange reaction.

Homura isn't curious enough though, and lets that conversation fade away. Luckily for them, Madoka and Mami finally return.

"I apologize," Mami tells them, polite smile on her lips. "There was a bit of a hold up at the register."

Homura notices she's a bit shorter now that her heels have been replaced by bowling shoes.

Mami brushes her ponytail back, suddenly seeming nervous. "Since you four bowled three frames earlier, the attendant said I could just bowl three frames to fill up the score. Does anyone mind if...?"

Kyouko waves her away. "Hurry up! The longer you stand here being wishy washy, the longer we have to wait!"

Mami frowns. "Kyouko..."

"Ah," Sayaka holds out her hands with a smile. "It's fine Mami-san! Just bowl what you need to! We'll gladly wait!"

Madoka nods. "See? I told you it'll be fine, Mami-san!"

Another smile from Mami. "Thank you. I'll be quick..."

With Mami now deciding on which ball to use, Madoka takes one look at the occupied seat by Homura and pouts.

No one notices—as Kyouko and Sayaka are now arguing about something, and Homura has her attention once more towards the lanes.

Madoka walks over, and the familiar whiff of strawberry is Homura's only warning before she plops down into her lap.

"Madoka...?" Homura knows there's another set of empty chairs right across from them, but Madoka merely makes herself comfortable.

"Hmm?"

Recognizing that tone, Homura sighs in resignation. "...Nothing." Her hands slip around Madoka's waist, and she tries her best to ignore how warm her face feels.

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They're starting their 5th frame, Madoka now finishing her turn, when Homura leans forward in her seat. "Crimson Devil, you still feel like making a bet...?"

Kyouko is sitting on the other side with Mami and looks at her curiously. "Yeah? You stepping up?"

Homura points to the screen. "If you can beat Tomoe-san's score, I'll pay for your dinner."

"..."

Homura turns back to see Madoka pull of a spare. She watches as she claps once in excitement, before she whirls around, pink eyes shining, lips tugged into a grin.

Homura stands to take her turn. "Congratulations, Madoka," she says as she approaches her with both hands held up.

Madoka's grin widens as she claps their hands together. "Thanks, Homura-chan! Good luck!"

"Mm..."

Homura looks to the screen: she's getting better, but she's still last. She pauses at Mami's score, and turns back, searching for crimson. As if sensing her gaze, Kyouko's eyes locks on her, and Homura responds by deliberately pointing at the screen.

Kyouko scowls, arms crossing against her chest. "How 'bout, if you break 100 I'll pay for your rabbit food?" she shouts from her seat.

Homura takes a moment to considers this. She tilts her head, as if for confirmation, and Kyouko smirks in challenge.

Five frames in, Homura is currently at 36.

Homura points to her name, and nods in acceptance. Once she's sure Kyouko has agreed, she turns around, wide steps taking her to the ball return. The brightly coloured bowling ball is in her hands as she strides over to the lane.

Her eyes flicker down to the small arrows painted past the foul line. She memorizes the position on where to release the ball, and, finally, she moves.

Two steps, arm swinging back. The slight slide as her left leg is placed in front of her right, arm now swung forward on the third step. Her hand releases the ball, though this time, she doesn't bother twisting her wrist.

She straightens out, and without bothering to watch it roll down, she turns around.

A brief moment, before there's the rattling sounds as all the pins fall. She flicks her hair behind her, a small smile on her lips as Kyouko's jaw drops.

Madoka immediately jumps up from her seat to congratulate her. Homura braces for impact, hands lightly resting against Madoka's waist as she's hugged tightly.

"Congratulations, Homura-chan! Your first strike!"

"Thank you, Madoka."

Kyouko scowls. "Beginner's luck. Let's see if you can do that again.**"**

Homura turns to her. "Would you like to make another be**t?"**

AN: Boooo. This chapter took longer than expected. But, yes, Mami is here! I don't know what the plans are for this story, which is why I find it kind of hard to write for. Also, boo descriptions! Boo everything!

Busy, so busy. Or maybe, I'm just really slow at editing. Ugh.

As always, thanks for reading/reviewing!

The Adventures of Purple Eggplant and Pink Bunny coming to a tumblr near you.

Maybe.

No longer concentrating on the game, Homura has her head bowed, eyes staring at her salad as she slowly picks out each and every piece of cranberry found inside.

A quick glance up, to where Mami is about to finish her roll for the 9th frame, before she continues with her task.

"Aw, come on!"

A loud crashing sound, following by another loud complaint from Kyouko: most likely another strike.

"Did I miss anything?"

Homura looks over to Madoka, watching as she retakes her seat next to that round bear. She's wiping her hands on her handkerchief, and when she finds Homura looking at her, she gives her a smile.

Homura points to the scoreboard with her fork. "You missed the Crimson Devil's valiant attempt at a comeback."

Madoka turns to the screen, eyes taking in the two dashes marking two continuous gutter balls.

"I heard that!" Kyouko yells in their direction.

"Homura-chan..." Slight disapproval in Madoka's voice, but Homura ignores it.

Instead, she gathers whatever cranberries already picked out onto her fork, and holds it towards Madoka.

"Madoka."

Madoka is already standing to take her turn. "Hm?"

Homura gestures to the fork. "Look, your favourite."

Her words earn her a small grin. Leaning down slightly, Madoka opens her mouth with a small 'ahh.'

Homura guides the small mound of cranberries into her mouth. "...They didn't even list this in their ingredients."

"Stop flirting already! Hurry up!" Kyouko shouts at them.

Mouth full, Madoka blushes as she straightens up.

"There's more when you come back..." Homura murmurs as she turns back to her salad.

"Mmhmm..." Madoka replies, chewing.

She moves over to the ball return, ignoring how Sayaka wolf whistles as she passes by.

Homura stops her nitpicking when she sees Madoka step up to the lane with a bowling ball in hand.

Two throws later, a spare is added to Madoka's score. As she walks to retrieve the ball for the last throw, her eyes automatically seek out lavender, and Homura gives her an encouraging smile that makes her blush.

To her embarrassment, she completely gutters the last attempt, and Kyouko's loud laughter does little to comfort.

She turns back, only to find Homura already out of her seat, walking to take her turn.

Homura intercepts her with a high five. "You did really well, Madoka."

Her words instantly makes her feel better.

Madoka smiles. "Thanks, Homura-chan. Good luck!"

Homura glances to the score: she's already passed 100. "Mm." She shrugs. "My salad is free, so I already consider this a win."

"Hurry up! I know grandmas that move faster than you!"

Homura rolls her eyes. "...but another strike, or equivalent wouldn't hurt."

Madoka reluctantly pulls away to take her seat as Homura moves to grab the brightly coloured bowling ball.

It definitely feels heavier in her hands, and though she won't admit it, she's glad that they're reaching the end of the game.

Once in front of the lane, she takes a moment to stare at the pins. Just as she's about to step forward, there's a loud shout.

She barely manages to keep the ball in her hands.

A whirl around, and she finds Kyouko smirking triumphantly; figures she would try the same trick again.

Homura merely shakes her head, and the sight of Mami moving to reprimand the redhead has her turning back around.

The first throw brings her one pin away from a spare, but she misses the last pin with her second throw.

A mocking whistle from behind, and she turns to find Kyouko grinning as she walks back to her seat. She merely points to screen, where her score is higher than Kyouko's; unless she manages two strikes, there's no way she can catch up.

The grin twists into a scowl, and Homura ignores those colourful words that spout from the Crimson Devil's mouth, instead focusing on not collapsing into her chair in front of Madoka.

Madoka holds out a hand, and she reaches over to meet her halfway with a soft clap.

"You did really well this game, Homura-chan!" Madoka tells her, obviously proud. "Even though I've been bowling a lot more times than you, I've never gotten a turkey before!"

"Mm..." Homura shrugs. She turns her attention back to the salad.

"So, what do you think of bowling?" Madoka asks, even as she watches Kyouko take her turn.

"...It's alright," Homura murmurs. "Madoka?"

"Hm?"

Another forkful of cranberries offered.

Once more, Madoka opens her mouth and lets Homura feed her.

Homura pulls the empty utensil away, frowning down at her salad. "I think that's most of it..."

Chewing, Madoka is eying the fork in Homura's hand as she slowly spears a few pieces of lettuce onto the plastic prongs. She follows her movements, watching as that same fork she had just eaten off of a few seconds ago connects with Homura's lips.

As if sensing her gaze, Homura looks up, blinking when she finds Madoka staring.

A tilt of her head, and Madoka quickly averts her eyes. "A-Ah...h-how's your salad, Homura-chan...?"

Done with her mouthful, Homura merely collects a few more pieces of lettuce, and once again, offers the fork to Madoka.

"The dressing is nice," she replies. "A little sweet, but not too much. Not sure what flavour it is though. Another thing not listed..."

A glance at Homura, before Madoka accepts the fork into her mouth.

"What do you think, Madoka?" Homura asks, already moving once more to fill her fork.

A small blush on her cheeks, Madoka concentrates on trying to figure out the taste. "Hmm." She brings up her hand to cover her mouth. "Might be some kind of sesame dressing?"

"Maybe we can try and find something like this at the market."

A finger is suddenly snapped in between them. Madoka jumps as Homura merely takes another bite of her salad.

"Hey lovebirds." Kyouko peers over them, wide smirk on her face. "We're about done here. Gonna finally get some grub."

"I still don't understand how you eat so much," Sayaka mutters from her chair; she's already taking off her bowling shoes.

Kyouko pats her stomach in response. "Fast metabolism is an amazing thing."

"...Not for those that has to deal with you and your insatiable hunger however," Mami cuts in.

Kyouko sticks out her tongue. "Whatever. I'm gonna go return this and go wash my hands."

Homura glances over to the scoreboard. "Don't forget, you're paying for my salad."

The only way Homura knows Kyouko heard her is that slight pause she sees in her steps as she's walking away.

Homura takes one more bite of her barely touched salad, before she slips the lid back on, placing the fork on top of that once she's done.

In the middle of taking off her shoes, Madoka hears the rustle of plastic and looks up. "You hardly ate any. You should've just waited until the restaurant."

Stooping over to untie her own laces, Homura frowns. "It was the cranberries..."

Madoka grins even as she turns her attention back to her shoes. "You know, you never did explain your strange aversion to anything that is a berry. For the longest time you wouldn't even eat strawberry flavoured things! And I know you're not allergic."

In the midst of slipping on her boots, Homura doesn't reply.

Madoka finishes changing into her sneakers. She wriggles her toes inside her socks, liking how nice it feels to be wearing her comfortable shoes again.

Done with her task, Homura finally sits up. She knows Madoka is still waiting for an answer.

"...Pass."

Madoka blinks. "W-What?"

Homura glances away. "Uhm. I pass. It's... not something I want to discuss at this moment. S-Sorry..."

"O-Oh!" Madoka quickly shakes her head. "N-No! It's... it's okay, Homura-chan! I'm sorry, I didn't... I didn't know..."

"No, that's alright," Homura murmurs, moving to stand. "We should wash our hands..." She looks around. "...as soon as one of them return."

"Y-Yeah." Madoka nods, standing to her feet.

She turns to Homura, only to find her watching the crowd, deliberately facing away.

It reminds Madoka that she still doesn't know much about her.

There's a huge urge to hold her hand, and she doesn't even need to think twice about it as she slips her hand over Homura's.

A few months ago, any physical contact would result in some type of knee-jerk reaction, maybe a jump, some kind of tension, or her pulling away. Now though, Madoka finds herself smiling when Homura merely turns to face her.

She doesn't know as much about her as she'd like, but she knows she eventually will.

Fingers now intertwined, Madoka is sure of this.

/

"So, where should we eat?" Kyouko asks, glancing around curiously.

Sayaka shrugs. "No idea. I don't exactly live here."

"Anything around here is mostly fast food," Kyouko comments, gesturing behind them to the large building they had exited from. "Not that I really care. But," she sticks out her thumb, pointing it to Mami, "Mami might."

Mami quickly steps in. "If possible, a sit down restaurant would be nice. We have been eating fast food almost everyday since we arrived here, and something else would be a nice change of pace."

Sayaka turns to Madoka. "Madoka? Got any suggestions?"

"Uhm." Madoka looks at Homura. They mostly ate meals at home, and going out usually meant going to the coffee shop.

Sayaka pokes Homura who has her attention toward the streets. "Homura? You live here. You know a place where we could go eat?"

A slow turn of her head. "...No. Why would you assume I would know, just because I live here? I hardly go out to eat."

Sayaka sighs in exasperation. "Seriously? Why are you so—"

Madoka holds out her hand. "Sayaka-chan."

"Whatever." Sayaka turns to Kyouko. "I think I saw a few restaurants on the way here. Let's just walk around until we find something?"

Kyouko shrugs. "That's fine by me. But you have 15 minutes, otherwise we're coming back here and grabbing a burger."

Mami hurriedly ushers them to the streets. "Let's not dawdle, shall we?"

\

Saturday night, and the streets are crowded as they search for a place to dine in.

Walking with Homura at her side, Madoka notices how she seems to be leaning on her more than usual.

A glance at her face, but the street lamps overhead cast a strange orange hue, and she's unable to tell if Homura seems a bit pale.

At least the night is almost over; dinner, and then back home.

A shout from Kyouko up ahead, and Sayaka tugs on Madoka's sleeve, guiding her through the crowd bunched around them.

She's pulled along, until they stop in front of a not so crowded family restaurant that Kyouko's sharp nose had found.

Mami enters to place her name on the waiting list, returning with news of a 15 minute wait.

Another group is called in, freeing the area besides the glass windows, and Kyouko immediately stakes out a claim in that spot. They join her side, and find that behind those windows, there's a large projection screen, displaying pictures of the meals served inside.

Kyouko is still drooling over the selection when they're finally called in.

Through the double glass doors, and the inside is a typical family restaurant. One side is lined with booths, large enough to accommodate at least 6, and the other is filled with tables for larger parties. The decor is coloured with shades of white, brown, and blue, broken up with random flowers placed at certain corners. Clean, with the usual clatter and clang of dishware, and a light murmur from meshing conversations heard within.

The waitress leads them to one of the empty booths, arm held out to the seats once they arrive.

"Just press the button when you are ready to order," the waitress tells them. A light bow right before she walks away.

Madoka enters one side first, with Homura taking the seat next to her.

Sayaka stands by the table, waiting to sit next to her, except Homura refuses to move.

"Hey, scoot over." Sayaka frowns down at her.

"Can't," Homura replies, placing her container of salad onto the table. She ignores Sayaka's glare and reaches for one of the menus.

"What do you mean you can't?" Sayaka demands, hands now on her hips.

Mami is already seated on the other side, and Kyouko merely grabs Sayaka and shoves her next to Mami. "Just sit. Obviously the lovebirds want to be together."

Madoka feels her face growing warm, but a look to Homura, and with the normal lighting found inside, she can tell that her complexion is a bit pale.

She leans in close. "Are you alright, Homura-chan?"

"I'm fine," Homura murmurs in response. "Let's just order something."

"Okay." Still worried, Madoka merely plants Homu-chan into Homura's lap.

Ignoring Homura's confused expression, she reaches for the menu as well.

They're mostly decided, and it only takes a few more minutes until they're finally ready.

Mami presses the button signaling for service, and shortly after, a different waitress with an electronic tablet in hand appears at their table.

They take turns rattling off their orders, and no one's at all surprised when Kyouko places two dishes for herself.

A repeat for confirmation, and the waitress bows once before she moves over to fulfill their drink order.

"I am not paying for you this time, Kyouko," Mami tells her firmly.

Kyouko mutters a few choice words under her breath, but she doesn't do it very quietly.

Judging by the frown on Mami's face, Sayaka realizes that she's sitting in between them to act as a buffer. It's not the first time she wonders what their relationship is.

Awkward silence around the table, interrupted when the waitress returns with cups of water and a soda for Kyouko.

A quick thank you mumbled by Madoka, before silence once again settles in.

Madoka takes a deep breath.

"Uhm." They all turn to Madoka who gives a nervous smile. "Y-You're really good at bowling, Mami-san. Do you bowl often?"

Blushing lightly at the compliment, Mami brushes her ponytail back, before she offers Madoka her own smile.

"Thank you, Kaname-san, but I'm not really that good. I bowl a little now and then, depending on my schedule."

Madoka shakes her head. "No, you're really good, Mami-san! I think that's the closest I've ever seen to anyone getting an almost perfect game. That kind of skill, you must be a part of a league or something?"

"Well—"

Kyouko scoffs.

Mami turns to her with a frown. "Is there something you'd like to say, Kyouko?"

Kyouko leans forward. "You know, if I had my own personal set of bowling balls, I'd be amazing as well."

Madoka tilts her head in confusion.

Kyouko smirks, and moves her hands in front of her chest, miming the action of something protruding out.

Sipping her water, Sayaka's eyes widen, right before she chokes as she tries to suppress a laugh.

Mami slouches forward, Kyouko's actions making her suddenly self-conscious.

Kyouko slaps Sayaka a few times on the back, even as the grin remains on her face.

"Uhm..." Madoka has no follow up, and she nervously glances around.

"...Excuse me, I need to use the restroom," Homura murmurs as she interrupts the awkward atmosphere. She hands Homu-chan to Madoka, before reaching into her pocket to pull out Amy. She places her on top of Homu-chan's head, patting it almost affectionately. "I'll be right back..."

Madoka watches her, eyes filled with worry as she follows after Homura as she makes her way across the restaurant.

"So..."

Madoka blinks, only to find Kyouko staring at her with an almost predatory gaze.

"Have you two kissed yet?" Kyouko asks, eyebrows waggling.

"U-Uhm..." Madoka turns to Sayaka for help.

Kyouko snaps her fingers, bringing her attention back. "No, seriously. I don't even know why you two are like, dancing around, or whatever. It's obvious you two like each other. So just, kiss, and get it over with."

Madoka hugs Homu-chan tightly. "I-It's not that easy..."

"Kyouko." Mami's stern voice interrupts. "That is none of your business."

Kyouko sighs. "Whatever. The longer you wait, the more time you're wasting, and the more regrets you'll have." She slams her hand on the table, ignoring how some of the water from the cups splashes out, and how some patrons nearby turn to her. "If you want something, you gotta take it now! You like her, so just take her! Just grab her, and make her see fireworks!"

Madoka bunches in her shoulders, trying to fight the blush as it warms her face up to her ears.

Luckily for her, one of the workers drop by with a polite smile.

"Excuse me... you're disturbing the other customers. Can you please keep it down?"

Sayaka grabs Kyouko and covers whatever retort she has ready by clapping her hand over that loud mouth. "Y-Yes! We're sorry about that! We'll be more quiet!"

Another polite smile, before the worker disappears.

Just as Sayaka is about to remove her hand, she quickly pulls it away.

"Ew! Did you just lick me?!"

A cackling laugh in response, but a sharp glare from the same worker has them lowering their heads as Madoka and Mami try and apologize on their behalf.

\\

Staring at her reflection, she knows it's not the bright fluorescent lights that's making her pallor seem washed out.

There's the beginnings of a small headache starting to pound away, and she briefly closes her eyes, a small respite against the harsh lighting.

Her eyes open when she hears the creak of the door, and she places her hands in the sink as an older woman walks in, a slightly curious expression on her face as she evaluates her appearance.

She ignores her, going through the motions as she washes her hands once more.

As soon as the woman disappears into one of the stalls, she moves her hands away from the sensor, and the sink automatically shuts off.

The only handkerchief she has is the one used at the bowling alley, and she's careful as she unwraps it, making sure to touch the side that didn't come into contact with the chairs.

Once her hands are dry, she pockets the purple cloth. One more glance at her reflection, and someone else enters as she makes her way to the door.

She slips in through the open gap, and the quiet hush from the bathroom immediately transforms into steady murmurs of a now crowded restaurant.

Her thoughts are on sleep and her soft futon waiting at home as she walks back to the table.

It's when she's halfway there, that she finally looks over—and she feels whatever fatigue collected from the day double.

She stops, and instead looks around.

If she's quick enough, she can probably sneak out without them noticing.

A brief debate, and it's only because Madoka is there that she continues on her way.

Madoka's the first to notice her arrival as everyone else is busy in conversation.

She throws her a nervous smile that is ignored as lavender burns into the new occupant sitting at the table.

Black hair, spiked up. Familiar annoying grin stretched across his face. Casual clothes that reminds her of those college guys that sometimes hit on her as she does mundane tasks, like shopping at the market.

"...Satoshi." There's obvious distaste in her voice.

He cuts himself off, grinning widely at Homura as she glares down at him. "Yo, Homu-chan! You're back!" He pats the seat next to him. "Here, have a seat!"

She unconsciously presses her hand into her leg. "...You're in my spot."

He leans back, obviously with no intention of moving. "It's okay. You can sit right next to me, Homu-chan." He pats the seat once more.

She's aware that a few people are staring: mainly Madoka. She decides she's too tired to deal with him, and merely sits down.

His mouth opens in surprise, but the grins reappears once more. He turns back to Mami. "As I was saying, culinary school really is interesting. On top of the dishes I get to learn in school, I get to implement them in the bar I'm working at. I'd say I'm at my ideal place at this moment. If you girls are in the neighborhood, you should totally drop by! I'll cook up a few of my signature dishes!"

Homura ignores him, placing her elbows onto the table as she rests her head in her hands. Just hearing his voice is making her more tired, and she really, really wants to go home.

Her phone beeps, and she blinks in response; the only person who ever messages her is Madoka, and Madoka is sitting right over there.

She lifts her head, eyes looking beyond Satoshi, only to find Madoka smiling at her and pointing to the phone held in her hand.

Understanding immediately, Homura slides out her phone from her jacket pocket.

'Are you okay, Homura-chan? I'm sorry about Satoshi-san joining us. He appeared out of nowhere, and kind of... invited himself over.'

She's slower with her response.

'I'm fine, just feeling a bit tired all of a sudden. And I know it's not your fault, Madoka. He's an idiot who has no sense of personal space.'

A small buzz on Madoka's side. Fingers flying over the keyboard, Madoka sends out her reply quickly.

Just as Homura's phone sounds once more, a hand reaches over and her phone is snatched out of her hands.

"What's this? Are you texting your boyfriend, Homu-chan?" Satoshi asks as he holds it curiously.

Patience wearing thin, Homura merely glares. "...You did not just take the phone out of my hands."

"Well, it's a bit rude for you to be texting while in company of other people, don't you think, Homu-chan?"

A slow count of 10 in her head as Homura grits her teeth. "Seriously, Satoshi. You're really on thin ice here."

He grins in response. "Come on, don't be like that, Homu-chan."

She doesn't reply, and merely moves out of her seat.

Whatever Satoshi is about to say is interrupted as she grabs his wrist, tugging him with her.

He doesn't budge, and she deliberately digs her fingernails into his skin.

He winces. "Ouch. Okay, okay. You should've just told me if you wanted to talk with me, little sis!"

"Homura-chan?" Madoka calls out in worry.

"We'll be right back," Homura replies, not even looking at Madoka as she drags Satoshi outside.

The table is left in silence, until Kyouko whistles softly. "That family is a bit weird, right?"

\\

As soon as they're clear from the restaurant doors, Homura lets go.

"...What is your problem?"

He stares at her, arms across his chest. "What? I didn't deliberately seek you out, if that's what you think! I came here to eat dinner, and I saw Madoka-chan. Her hair was practically calling to me! She really is a cutie, isn't she? Think she'd date me?"

Homura merely holds out her hand.

Satoshi sighs, and places her phone onto her waiting palm.

She slips it into her jacket pocket, before she faces him once more. "...Considering how large Tokyo is, and how I can avoid seeing you, or anyone that knows you, for three months, you expect me to believe that you somehow ran into us as you were going to dinner...? As far as I can remember, you tend to avoid family restaurants unless you're with a date. And I don't see another trophy girlfriend at your side,

unless you left her back at your table as you went to flirt with another table full of girls..."

Satoshi grins. "For someone who claims she hates me, you know a lot about me, don't you?"

Homura gives him a humorless smile. "The same can be said of you."

He winces, his normal grin cracking at her words. "H-Hey, don't be like that, Homu-chan. I thought we were okay now, you know? At least, it seemed like it, when we talked last night...?"

He reaches for her and she smacks his hand away.

"I am too tired to deal with you right now. Just like I was too tired yesterday." She sighs, stepping back. "...Thank you though, for what you did at the game center."

He blinks. "W-What are you talking about?"

She quirks her eyebrow. "I spotted your urchin hair in the crowd. I know it was you who called the security guards over."

He laughs nervously, hand rubbing his neck. "I-I don't know what you're talking about, Homu-chan!"

"...Fine. Then thank you, to whoever decided to help."

His hand drops back to this side as he grins. "You looked really close to punching him."

Homura ignores how he completely admits to his interference. "...I was close to breaking his nose."

"And we both know how that would've turned out. And that was a complete coincidence, by the way! I was at the game center to check out the dance contest! Who knew that you'd be taking Madoka-chan on a date there?"

She breathes out slowly. "Satoshi."

He's still grinning. "Homura."

"...Can't you just leave me alone?"

He frowns at her words. "Homu-chan—"

"Look. Yesterday... was not me reaching out to you. Whether it was you working, or Keiichi-san, it wouldn't have mattered. My fr—... someone I knew, was in a precarious situation, and Tetsuno is the safest place I know in that area. Thank you, for allowing her to stay, but please, can't we just leave things like that?"

"W-Wait, H-Homu—"

Once again she slaps his hand away.

"I'm doing fine. I have been doing fine. Listen, Satoshi. Sen-san is no longer here. You no longer have an obligation to 'take care' of me. No one's going to know if you broke your promise. No one cares. Good for you, if you really do like cooking, but, if you're doing this because of him, don't. I don't know what you're trying to accomplish by staying there, but..." she shakes her head, "stop trying to seek me out."

He grits his teeth. "Homura. You're my family—my baby sister! You can't expect me to just write you off—"

She glares at him. "Don't you dare play that card with me, Satoshi. You know as much as I do just how much *family* means to me."

His mouth snaps shut.

She sighs. "Satoshi, I don't... I don't hate you, alright? But... it doesn't mean I want you to be a part of my life. You, here," she gestures to him, "only reminds me of things I don't want to remember." She holds out a hand to stop his protest. "Because, as much as you'd like to deny it, those same people behind you, supporting you, are the same people that I don't want to remember."

"...They're your family too, Homura—"

She takes another step back. "No. They're *not* my family, and they made that pretty clear early on. Whatever money I owe your family, I will pay them back. It'll be slow—but I'll pay them back every cent. And, if I should die before then, hopefully my insurance will cover the rest."

"Homura!"

She ignores him, already turning away. "Just—leave me alone. I'm doing fine without you." She glances over her shoulder. "...Pretend... pretend that I died. You never had trouble doing that, before."

He can only stare as she walks back inside.

He bows his head. "Homu-chan..."

/

Walking slowly, she's trying her best to calm down before she reaches the table.

And for the most part, she succeeds.

"Welcome back, Homura-chan!"

Like always, Madoka is the first to notice her.

She pushes back whatever memories talking to Satoshi had conjured up, and instead concentrates on the now.

"Thank you, Madoka," she replies as she takes her seat.

"Where's your brother?" Kyouko asks curiously, looking around.

That word has Homura tensing, enough that it makes Madoka worried.

"He had to leave," Homura tells her, readjusting her jacket as she keeps her eyes down. "Had to cover someone's shift for work."

Madoka watches as she reaches behind her to fidget with her hair.

Kyouko sighs. "Seriously? Damn. I was going to try and see if he could pay for my meal, too."

Mami frowns. "Kyouko."

Kyouko shrugs. "What? I totally know his type. A few nice words here and there, and he'd be buying me dinner."

Rubbing her forehead, Homura sighs. "Unfortunately, that's exactly the kind of guy he is."

Kyouko smirks. "I'm pretty good at reading people." She leans forward, arm on the table as she looks at Homura. "So, what's up with you two?"

Hands returning to her lap, Homura stares.

"Come on. As soon as you saw him, I felt the temperature in the room drop like 10 degrees." Kyouko gestures with her hand. "You obviously hate his guts. What, was he a horrible big brother? Did he steal your stuff as a kid, and blame you for everything?"

Mami shakes her head. "Kyouko."

Madoka places a hand on Homura's, hoping to calm her.

Homura's glaring as Kyouko keeps her eyes on her, a challenge issued on that face. Payback for the salad, maybe.

"...Yes."

Kyouko blinks. "What?"

Homura leans back against her seat. "Yes, to all of those things."

"Huh."

Before she can ask to elaborate, a waitress with plates of food balanced on her arms approaches their table, and Kyouko immediately turns to her.

"Food!"

Homura feels whatever anger fade away, leaving only that usual empty feeling that sits in her chest whenever she's reminded of her 'family.'

Madoka once again leans in close. "...Homura-chan? Are you alright?"

Homura takes a moment to enjoy the warmth from Madoka's body heat against her. She turns her hand, so that her palm faces Madoka's.

"Yes," she says softly, "I'm fine."

Her expression says otherwise, and Madoka once more links their fingers together.

Homura squeezes her hand in response. "Thank you. I'll be fine."

Madoka eyes her briefly. She doesn't move away, and merely lets Homura lean against her as she turns to her food.

\

There's a bag with leftovers hanging from her wrist as they're gathered outside the restaurant; even though there's plenty of food at home, there's no way she's going to let Kyouko claim 'dibs.'

They're in the process of exchanging phone numbers, at least everyone is, except Homura, who doesn't even have Sayaka's number, and Kyouko, who hates being tied down by modern technology.

Homura stifles another yawn, the third one within a few minutes.

It's enough that Madoka notices, and she smiles at Mami. "It was really nice meeting you, Mami-san, Kyouko-chan! But we should head home now. It's getting late."

Mami nods, matching Madoka's smile with her own.

It's different though. Homura can tell that it's not as friendly—and more borderline polite.

"Perhaps," Homura can hear a bit of uncertainty in Mami's tone, "we could grab lunch, or tea sometime this week...? Kyouko and I will be in Tokyo for another week, until the circuit ends."

Madoka nods eagerly. "Sure! I wouldn't mind. And I'm sure Homura-chan doesn't either!"

Another yawn in response even as Homura tries to fight against it.

Mami claps once. "Splendid! We'll figure out our schedules and plan something." Her smile is friendlier this time. "It was really nice meeting you, Kaname-san, Akemi-san, Miki-san."

Madoka shakes her head. "Madoka is fine, Mami-san! And likewise!"

"Sayaka is fine as well," Sayaka adds in; she's been surprisingly quiet so far.

Homura's veiled attempt to hide another yawn succeeds in making Kyouko yawn.

"Alright, I'm beat," Kyouko says as she stretches her arms above her. "The more I see Sunshine over here yawning, the more I want to head to bed. Let's go already, Mami."

Mami nods. "Alright. I'll message you later, Kaname-san?"

"Sure!"

Mami bows lightly. "It was nice meeting you three. Good night!"

Kyouko waves. "Yeah. 'Night. I'll have Mami contact you about the competition for next week, Sayaka."

Sayaka gives her a thumbs up. "Sure."

"Good night!" Madoka waves as they walk away.

"Shall we go?" Sayaka asks as she turns to Madoka. "Homura looks like she's falling asleep on her feet already. Is the poor baby tired?"

Homura ignores her, tugging Madoka along as they head back home.

Sayaka follows after them quietly, watching as they walk side by side, leaning against each other.

She ignores that pang of jealousy, and instead increases her pace until she's right besides Madoka.

"So..."

Madoka turns to her.

"What'd you think of Kyouko?" Sayaka asks.

"Hmm..." Madoka hugs Homu-chan tighter, hugging Homura's arm tighter in the process. She's reminded of the conversation with Homura earlier, and she can't help but smile at the silly nicknames they made up.

Sayaka clears her throat, drawing Madoka out from her distracted thoughts.

"Uhm, she seems nice," she answers. She thinks to Kyouko's confrontation about her and Homura. "A bit forward, but... her heart seems to be in the right place."

Sayaka nods, feeling relieved that Madoka seems to approve of Kyouko, more or less.

She drops into silence, but her eyes keep shifting around, moving from Madoka, to the side, and then back to Madoka once more.

Homura sighs. "Whatever you want to ask, ask already."

Sayaka tries to look affronted, but another look from Homura has her dropping the act.

She clears her throat. "You think... Mami-san and Kyouko are together?"

Madoka blinks. "Together?"

Sayaka gestures. "You know. Together, as in, dating."

Homura leans forward. "...Aren't you technically still with your boyfriend?"

Sayaka scowls. "That has nothing to do with this!"

"Eh?" Madoka looks to Homura, before turning to Sayaka. "Why would..."

Homura leans over, whispering something into her ear.

Homura's breath against her tickles, and she fights down the urge to shiver.

Madoka concentrates on her words—and her eyes widen. "W-What?"

Sayaka coughs into her hand. "What? I'm just asking! It's a simple question!"

Homura pulls back, only to give Sayaka a smirk. "You've been tempted by the Devil."

Sayaka shoots her a glare. "Shut up! I'm not tempted by anyone."

"...The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

"Whatever," Sayaka grumbles.

They reach another corner just as the street light turns red.

Sayaka taps her foot impatiently as she waits for the signal to change.

"...So..." She turns Madoka. "You think Mami-san and Kyouko are together?"

"Uhm..." Madoka glances to Homura, who shrugs. She turns back to Sayaka. "I'm... not sure, but they do seem very close. M-Maybe they're related, somehow? It sounds like they live together, and that they have known each other for a while. And uhm, Mami-san is obviously here because of Kyouko-chan."

Sayaka's shoulders slump forward. "Yeah..." She tucks her hands into her hoodie pocket, looking undeniably rejected.

Her reaction has Madoka giving her a nervous look, but she feels Homura tug her forward as the light turns green.

Their conversation lapses once more into silence, and the only sounds around them are their footsteps, and the constant hum as people and cars pass them b**y**.

AN: the power of editing! yeaaah! you know what, this story is soooo slow. All my stories are soooooo slow. *shakes self* sslooowww. Oh, and a little Homura background in this chapter. *pats Homura on the head*

oops! was so excited to update forgot:

Thank you, as always, for reading/reviewing :))) let's hope the next update won't take another month. Sighhh.

By the time they arrive home, it feels like she is all but leaning onto Madoka for support.

All she wants to do is sleep.

As she waits for Madoka to unlock the door, a strange idea enters her mind: if only her futon could somehow unfold itself with just her thoughts alone, that would be ideal.

She shakes her head; she needs to sleep.

A click, and she's the first through the door. A check to the clock, and it's 30 minutes until she needs to take her medication.

Moving, she barely remembers to drop off the leftovers onto the kitchen counter. There's a brief struggle as she tries to untangle the plastic bag from her wrist. Frustration slowly builds as her exhaustion has her fingers slipping, and the simple task ends up being a lot more difficult than it should be. She finally succeeds, and it takes all her will power to not slam the bag down onto the floor.

She starts making her way to the bathroom when there's a hand around her arm, effectively stopping her in her tracks.

She turns, brows furrowed, only to find Madoka staring at her.

Her response is automatic: her anger disappears in an instant. "Madoka...?"

Madoka briefly glances away, before turning back. "...You're going to take your medicine outside, right? There's no need for you to hide in the bathroom anymore."

She swallows heavily; she has been anticipating this, but hearing Madoka say it in that tone only serves to make her feel bad.

Madoka continues staring. There's movement out of the corner of her eye, and she remembers that it's not just the two of them, alone.

She nods. "...Yes."

Those pink eyes seem to pierce through hers, as if trying to seek the truth in her words. She averts her eyes.

"...Good." Pressure around her arm lightens as that strong hand lets go.

She takes it as permission to leave, and quickly continues on her way.

Madoka watches as Homura makes a slightly wobbly beeline towards their shared room, waiting until she disappears through the doorway, before letting out a small sigh.

"What was that about?"

Sayaka's voice has her jumping. She places a hand to her heart as she turns around.

A quirked eyebrow. "Did you already forget that I'm here?"

"Sorry, Sayaka-chan." Madoka hugs Homu-chan close. "Homura-chan—she takes her medication in the bathroom, which is how she pretty much hid her heart transplant all this time..."

Both of Sayaka's eyebrows shoot up. She whistles softly. "Wow, okay. So she really was deliberately hiding it from you. And, that finally explains why she takes those long 'showers' of hers..."

Reminded of Homura's deception right under her nose, Madoka frowns. "Y-Yeah..."

Sayaka clears her throat. "Well, at least you now know. Another thing learned from the ever mysterious Akemi Homura."

"Y-Yeah..." It's an absent reply, and Sayaka's attempt at humour goes over Madoka's head. "I'm going to get changed," she murmurs, already moving to her bedroom.

"Sure. I'll uh..." Sayaka glances around, "I'll be right here."

She knows Madoka is no longer listening though. She sighs.

The point of this impromptu trip was to get away from the drama, but it seems like she just keeps stumbling into even more landmines.

Sharp crimson flashes in her mind, before she quickly pushes those thoughts away.

/

Dressed once again in her oversized red jersey, she's sitting at the kitchen counter, Sayaka seated across. There's a projection screen turned on in front of her, the channel tuned to the news.

She's not listening though, and her eyes keep glancing to the side.

The clock reads 10:57pm, and Homura is still in the bathroom.

There's a brief moment with a bit of anger when she realizes there's no guarantee that Homura will listen to her. She could be taking her medication in the bathroom, and she wouldn't know. Just as she's about to stand, she hears sounds from the living room.

She tilts back against her seat, one hand holding the counter as she tips over slightly for a better view. She sees Homura walking closer, now dressed in her purple pajamas, familiar glasses on her face, hair looking slightly damp. That explains why she had taken so long.

She had taken a shower.

Her eyes glance to the clock; less than a minute to go.

The chair is safely lowered to the floor as Homura quietly settles into the seat next to her. Two sets of eyes are watching as a small plastic case is gently placed on the counter.

Sayaka pretends to be concentrated on her laptop; it's not like she has anywhere to go, really. The living room would maybe provide them with a bit more privacy, but she's kind of curious how this will play out.

Homura snaps open the lid, lifting and setting that aside once it's no longer attached to the container. One by one, she pulls out her medication.

Madoka is watching her very closely. For each package revealed, her eyes flicker over to label, memorizing the names for future reference.

Immunosuppressants. Something for her blood pressure. Supplements.

They're all there, in that little, plastic case.

The little case that Homura has been *hiding* from her for months now.

She sees Homura nervously glance over. Her pink eyes are unwavering, and lavender quickly looks away.

Good; she should feel guilty.

The clock reads 11:02pm. The sound of crinkling plastic, followed by hollow rattles as Homura extracts her medicine from their packaging. A soft sigh, and a handful of pills now sit in her curled palm.

Without saying anything, Madoka stands. Lavender trails after her, watching as she moves around the kitchen. An opened cupboard as a cup is pulled out. The

twinkling sound as water fills the glass. A moment later, she returns with a cup of water, sliding it right in front of Homura, before she settles back into her seat.

Homura blinks, shoulders slightly hunched. "T-Thank you," she murmurs.

Madoka remains quiet. She knows that she is making Homura nervous—she knows her eyes are practically drilling into her.

But she wants—she wants to know everything about her, and this is a part of Homura's life that she wasn't aware of, until now.

That thought makes her eyes burn. She ignores it, and instead concentrates her full attention on—the person who unknowingly holds her heart in those fragile hands.

Homura takes a brief sip of water, before she finally tilts her head back as those handful of pills are tipped into her mouth.

A larger gulp of water, and the medicine disappears down her throat.

She continues drinking, until the glass is empty. A lick of her lips, and just as she's about to stand for a refill, Madoka is already moving.

"I'll get it."

Homura wants to protest, but one look to that stern face, and her initial words are swallowed.

"T-Thank you," she murmurs once more, leaning back in her seat as Madoka enters the kitchen, empty cup in hand.

Sayaka sits up. "That wasn't that bad," she comments lightly, hoping to somehow clear the strange atmosphere surrounding them.

Homura shrugs. "They're just pills..."

Stomps as bare feet hit tile, and there's a loud clatter as a cup is heavily placed on the counter. Water splashes, and both of them jump, turning to Madoka, who has returned with an uncharacteristic scowl on her face.

The look Homura gives her, has Madoka sighing. "Here, Homura-chan."

When Homura merely continues staring timidly, Madoka forces her face to relax. She knows it works somewhat when Homura finally reaches for the cup.

"T-Thank you..." Her voice remains quiet. She takes a sip, and anyone can see she's deliberately drinking slowly to avoid talking.

Madoka sits back down. She decides that she'll let Homura finish her drink, and turns her attention to the muted projection screen in front of her.

A press of the button, and the small kitchen is filled with audio from the nightly news.

"...There are currently still no leads to the string of robberies that has hit Tokyo within these past few months. Police are urging anyone who may have any possible information to please step forward, no matter how small it may be. In lieu of growing concerns, patrols have been increased in areas where the attacks have been most prominent. The police are also urging citizens to stay at home after 10pm, and when possible, to at least travel in small groups, as targeted victims have always been alone. In other news, the city continues with its ongoing battle to end Kabukicho, yet the district refuses to bow—"

Madoka lowers the volume; almost every news story tended to focus on those robberies lately.

"Huh, is that what Homura was talking about yesterday?" Sayaka comments from her seat.

"Hm?" Madoka looks over.

"The robberies. It's why she didn't want me staying at the train station..."

Madoka nods, now absently browsing the channels to see if there's anything else to watch. "Yeah... it's been going on for months now. I mean, Tokyo's bigger than Mitakihara, but I never felt like it was that unsafe here... a little bit of common sense..." She frowns when she recalls those guys at the game center. "...Anyways, I think it's the fact that they haven't caught anyone yet that's the most worrying..."

She finally stops at a random channel, recognizing footage from an old movie she has watched before.

It's not like she's really watching though, and she turns back to face Homura, who is now fidgeting with her empty cup.

As if feeling Madoka's gaze on her, Homura sits up, nervously glancing over.

Madoka opens her mouth, but—

"Hey, Homura."

They both turn to Sayaka.

"Uh... That is..." Sayaka rubs the back of her neck. "...whatdoyouthinkofKyouko?" she blurts out.

Homura blinks. "...What?"

Sayaka sighs. "Ugh. I was... that is... what..." she looks away. "...What do you think of Kyouko...?"

Homura frowns. "...You're asking me?"

Sayaka grits her teeth. "Yeah."

"...Why?"

Sayaka snaps her head towards her, eyes suddenly angry and very defensive. "W-Why not? Can't I ask your opinion of something? Like, can't you just answer without questioning everything?"

Homura blinks as Madoka holds out a hand. "Sayaka-chan, calm down."

Sayaka catches herself, her anger leaving almost immediately. "S-Sorry. That was—that was totally uncalled for. Sorry."

Homura tilts her head, interest piqued. She debates, and decides she's too tired to really think of a good sarcastic response.

"...She is... someone that doesn't fit into your usual crowd. Yet at the same time, you two seem to get along well enough."

Sayaka raises an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

Homura sits forward, elbows resting on the counter as she places her chin in her hands. "You know what I am talking about. Can you name anyone in your current circle of friends who are even remotely similar to the 'Crimson Devil'?"

Sayaka frowns, taking a moment to cycle through all her known acquaintances. She blinks.

Homura blinks as well, and Madoka notices that her eyes stay closed for a bit too long, before they once again open.

Sayaka suddenly remembers something. "That reminds me. Earlier, at the bowling alley, you told me that I should be careful of Kyouko. Why?"

Homura shrugs, though it's more of a barely noticeable shift of her shoulders. "She seems like someone who attracts trouble."

Sayaka's lips dip down into a more prominent frown. "And what are you basing this on? Her nickname?"

Homura shakes her head, once more blinking slowly. "No. Intuition, and a bit of experience. She... her character seems candid enough. And it's not that she's directly trouble, but, maybe, she's the type to draw in the wrong kind of crowd."

"...You don't even know her." Sayaka has her arms crossed over her chest, and she's all but glaring at Homura.

Her reaction only serves to enforce Homura's initial thoughts.

"She's right though, Homura-chan," Madoka interrupts. "Kyouko-chan seems nice enough."

Homura glances to her briefly, before turning back to Sayaka. "...You asked for my opinion. I'm merely telling you what I think. Not to mention, Tomoe-san's 'joking' words were most likely not 'joking' at all." She sighs. "You mentioned that she's a semi-finalist in this dance competition, correct?"

Sayaka nods.

"And, judging by the crowd and popularity, it seems like this competition, and their participants would be well known."

Sayaka nods again as Homura expectantly stares at her.

A pause, and Homura sighs once more.

"...Meaning, that you could probably do a search on her online, and something will come up."

Sayaka's eyes widen; she hadn't thought of that.

Homura closes her eyes, suddenly hunching over as she rests her forehead on her hands. "...A big competition like that most likely has sponsors," she murmurs as Madoka turns to her in worry. "She can't have done anything bad if she's still able to stay in the competition..."

"Homura-chan? Are you alright?"

Homura slowly sits up. "If that's all, Miki Sayaka, I'm going to head to bed now."

Sayaka is staring at her laptop, hands poised on the keyboard. "Y-Yeah. Uh, thanks. For the input..."

"Homura-chan!"

There's a clatter, and Sayaka looks up just in time to see Homura fall over, taking Madoka down with her.

She immediately stands to her feet. "Hey! Are you alright?"

Madoka manages to sit up even as Homura remains half lying in her lap. "Sayaka-chan, help me move her to the couch."

"Y-Yeah!"

Homura weakly grabs Madoka's leg. "W-Wait. I just... I just need to..." Her head remains leaning against Madoka's leg, and Madoka remembers Homura mentioning nausea as one of the side effects to her medication.

"W-Wait, Sayaka-chan. I think moving Homura-chan right now will make her throw up..."

"Uh... alright...?" Sayaka stands by the counter, unsure of what she should be doing.

Madoka remains as still as possible, afraid any movement will make Homura's condition worse. She breathes out slowly, eyes concentrated on that head of hair that's still pressed against her leg.

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A few minutes, and Homura now finds her head in Madoka's lap.

The nausea is still there, but it's slowly fading away, like usual.

Fingers are gently threading through her hair, and she's falling asleep despite her best attempts to stay awake.

She definitely doesn't want to continue sleeping on the floor—and her embarrassment of lying in Madoka's lap, combined with Sayaka's presence, eventually has her sitting up.

Tentative movements, as she's still afraid she's going to empty out her stomach; luckily, the nausea and dizziness has dissipated enough that she's successful as she leans against Madoka.

Madoka is holding her close, and she turns to her, cheeks red.

"T-Thank you, Madoka. Uhm, I apologize..."

Madoka shakes her head. "Are you sure you're alright now?"

She nods. "Y-Yes... I am fine."

She moves to stand, and Madoka immediately helps her up.

"Everything alright there, Homura?" Sayaka asks, half out of her seat in case she's needed.

"Yes..." Homura glances away. "...Sorry."

Madoka gently grabs her arm. "Does that happen often?"

"Uhm. S-Sometimes... mostly if I had a particularly tiring day. It usually passes fairly quickly, and..." Her eyes flicker to the side. "...usually I'm sitting down when I take my medication."

Sayaka slowly lowers herself to her seat, still watching. "...So, sometimes you fall over in the bathroom after you take your pills?"

Homura frowns as Madoka turns to her with wide eyes. "No, that hasn't happened in a while."

Madoka grips her arm tightly. "...What?"

Homura flinches when she realizes what she has said. "Uhm. I mean—"

"Homura-chan! Do you know how dangerous that is? You could fall over and hit your head—and no one would know because you said *you were taking a shower*!"

"It's—"

Madoka is angry, and she's unsuccessful as she tries to move away.

"T-That is—"

"Is it usually this bad?" Madoka demands. "Your nausea?"

Homura blinks. She had answered this. "Uhm. S-Sometimes...?"

"Have you talked to your doctor about it?"

Homura nods. "Yes, it was worse before, but they changed the prescription. I'm—doing better now..."

Madoka frowns, still looking unconvinced. "But have you told them about how sometimes it makes you *fall over*? Is this a recent development? Has it always been like this?"

"W-Well—"

"Maybe you should call your doctor, and tell them about it. It could an allergic reaction or something, Homura-chan."

"I-I'm fine, Madoka."

"You're practically falling asleep on your feet, Homura-chan! Sudden weakness could mean something serious!"

"I'm just—tired because I had less than 3 hours of sleep," Homura insists. "It's nothing, Madoka. I'm fine."

"But—"

Homura leans against her, eyes closing. "Please, let it go for now, Madoka. I-I'll call them in the morning, if you want. But, please, I would really, really like to go to sleep now."

Madoka holds her tighter. If it was up to her, she would have Homura's doctor on speed dial right at this moment. She sighs.

"*Fine,*" she bites out. "But right when you wake up, you better call them."

Homura nods lightly. "Yes, I promise," she mumbles. "Can I go sleep now...?"

Another sigh. "Okay."

A bit of maneuvering, and Madoka is supporting Homura's weight as they walk to the bedroom.

Sayaka shakes her head. At least Homura seems to be okay; she had to be, if she was willing to argue with Madoka.

She turns her attention back to her laptop.

Just as her fingers move across the keyboard, she blinks when she feels a buzz from her phone.

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Madoka lowers the half asleep Homura onto her bed. She stands there, and watches her for a moment.

One lavender eye cracks open, and she can see how unfocused it is. "Madoka...?"

"I'll get your futon ready, Homura-chan."

That eye is already closing, and she hears a soft murmur of something as a reply.

She knows if she takes too long, Homura will be asleep.

She's moving to the closet, when her footsteps pause. "Homura-chan?"

Scratch that, Homura is already asleep.

She's definitely not strong enough to carry her to her futon, and instead settles for tucking Homura in. She retrieves the small tiger that Homura places on the dresser every morning, and after a bit of searching, she finally finds Amy in the bathroom. She already assumes that Homura has cleaned her, judging by the damp cloth resting nearby.

She smiles to herself as she slips both plushies into Homura's hands.

Her smile turns adoring when she sees one of Homura's sleeping habits kick in; Homura automatically draws them in close, until both plushies are pressed against her cheek.

Those thick glasses are gently tugged off, and she carefully folds them closed. She reaches over, fingers brushing back Homura's bangs.

A glance to the door, before she turns back to Homura. "Homura-chan...?"

No reply.

She leans down, and places a kiss on Homura's forehead.

She pulls back, face lightly tinged pink. "Good night, Homura-chan," she whispers softly.

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Once her blush fades, Madoka makes her way to the kitchen to inform Sayaka of her new sleeping arrangements.

She's entering the living room when she hears voices, and she can't remember if she left the projection screen on.

Closer, and she can hear that it's Sayaka talking. The kitchen enters her vision, and she's greeted by strained laughter.

As soon as she spots Sayaka, the expression on her face confirms who the caller is.

"...You're such a kidder, Kyousuke!"

Madoka gestures, giving her an expectant look.

Sayaka shakes her head. "So... uh, is there another reason you called, Kyousuke?"

Madoka quietly takes a seat.

"O-Oh? Y-Yeah, of course I miss you too... Uh huh..."

Those pink eyes are glaring at her, and Sayaka responds by turning away.

"Really? Next month?"

Madoka frowns.

"Y-Yeah! That sounds great! Uh huh. Right... alright, have fun then. Yeah, next month. I'll see you then. Take care, alright? ...Okay. Bye, Kyousuke."

Sayaka lowers her phone, one hand already held out.

"I know what you're going to say..."

"Sayaka-chan..."

She slumps forward. "I-I know, alright? I'm such a coward... I was—going to. But, I couldn't... I..." She closes her eyes and lets out a small, bitter laugh. "He called to wish me a happy anniversary... A week late..."

Madoka stares at her for a moment. Quietly, she rises from her seat. A few steps, before she's wrapping her arms around Sayaka's shoulders.

"...Next month, Kyousuke's coming back," Sayaka croaks out. "I could... I'll tell him then, face to face."

Madoka frowns. She doesn't approve, but she knows that Sayaka won't listen to her. She gives Sayaka's shoulders one final squeeze, and pulls away.

She sighs. "...I know you need to take your time Sayaka-chan, but the longer you push things back, the harder it will be for you to take the next step forward."

"I know..."

"What happened to being selfish?" Madoka asks softly. "I—was..." She glances away. "And, even though it hurts to know that Homura-chan was lying to me, if—if I hadn't been selfish... if I hadn't had asked, I wouldn't have known. And, maybe it would've remained that way until—it was too late."

Sayaka lowers her face into her hands. "I-I know, Madoka. I know. But," she sighs as she lifts her head, "Kyousuke... he at least deserves to be told in person. I can't —just break up with him over the phone or something, Madoka!"

Madoka's brows furrow. She sighs. "I disagree, but... it's your call."

Sayaka slowly relaxes. She can at least put it off for a bit longer.

Madoka turns to her suddenly, a sheepish smile on her face. "Uhm, by the way, you're going to have to sleep on the couch tonight."

Sayaka raises her eyebrow.

Madoka averts her eyes. "Homura-chan fell asleep on my bed."

"Ooh?" Sayaka sits up, hands now folded in front of her. "Go on."

She can't help it, she feels her cheeks growing warm due to the knowing smirk now spanning across Sayaka's lips.

"I was—I needed to get her futon ready, but—stop looking at me like that!"

Sayaka grins. She leans back against her seat, head now tilted up to the ceiling. "At least one of us is going somewhere."

Madoka stands against the counter, now frowning. "...Yeah, but..." She shakes her head. "W-Why couldn't Homura-chan have lied about something else...?"

Sayaka turns to her in worry when she sees that Madoka looks close to tears.

"Why did she have to be sick...? I—" Madoka swallows heavily, wiping at her eyes with her sleeve. "Every time I see her, it's... it's like I'm reminded that she's not going to be here for long."

"Hey." Sayaka reaches over, drawing Madoka in close for a hug. She rubs her arm, trying to comfort her. "Remember what I said? Homura's stubborn, alright? She's not—she's not as fragile as you're making her seem, Madoka."

Madoka turns her head, burying her face into Sayaka's shoulder. "I know," she mumbles. "But there's so many unknown variables, Sayaka-chan. Who knows what will happen in a few months...? O-Or even next week. T-There's—"

Sayaka grips her tightly by the shoulders, pulling away so that she can look at her face. "Madoka, listen to me, alright? Stop it. Stop thinking about 'What if's or 'What will happen'! Homura is fine. She's the same Homura that you have known these past few months. The only difference is that now you know about her heart thing."

"Y-Yeah, but—"

"Nope!" Sayaka shakes her head. "Stop it, alright?" Her hands are turning Madoka around, until she's facing the living room. "You're tired. Go to sleep. You have the chance to share the bed with Homura, so go enjoy it. Go 'baby koala' her all you want, alright? She won't care, and she definitely doesn't mind."

Madoka blushes, finally remembering the nickname Sayaka had given her back in middle school.

And that Homura had called her that earlier today.

"...The extra blankets—"

"—are in the closet. I know where they are." Sayaka gently pushes her forward. "Go sleep, alright?"

Madoka glances back. "W-What about you, Sayaka-chan...?"

Sayaka turns to her laptop, her eyes flickering to the browser that is still stuck on a search page. "I'm gonna stay up for a bit longer. Maybe organize my thoughts."

"Maybe—"

Sayaka waggles a finger at her. "Seriously, Madoka, go sleep. I'll be fine. Homura's waiting for you."

Madoka automatically turns her face towards the bedroom. She glances back to Sayaka, who gives her an encouraging nod. She takes one step forward.

She pauses. "Sayaka-chan."

"Yeah?"

"...Thank you."

A wink. "Hey, what are best friends for?"

They exchange a smile. "Good night, Sayaka-chan."

"'Night, Madoka."

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Despite how tired she is, sleep eludes her.

A quick shower, and she's in her pajamas as she decides to finally work on her homework that she has been putting off.

She leaves her desk lamp on the lowest setting, and points it towards the wall.

She's calculating numbers in her head, lips moving as she's murmuring answers to herself, when she feels the bed shift.

A rustle of the blankets, and she lowers her book just in time to see Homura open her eyes.

Lavender stares at her as she stares back.

Slow blinks, followed by a squinting of her eyes. "...Madoka...?"

Madoka leans over. "What's wrong, Homura-chan?" She keeps her voice to a whisper. One hand gently settles on top of the blankets covering Homura.

She sees Homura move her head around, confusion lining her face.

"You fell asleep on my bed, Homura-chan," she explains softly.

Homura blinks sleepily. "Oh... I'm sorry..." She slowly starts sitting up. "I-I'll go back to my futon..."

Madoka presses her hand down, preventing her from moving further.

"Madoka...?"

"It's fine. Just sleep here tonight."

Homura glances at her, before slowly lowering herself back onto the bed. "...W-What are you still doing up?"

"Mm. Couldn't sleep." Madoka removes her hand when she's sure Homura isn't going anywhere. "I'm sorry, did the lights wake you?"

Homura shifts, and blinks when she feels something underneath her arm.

Tora, and then Amy is pulled out. She stares at them blankly, before holding them close to her face. "N-No... Bathroom," she murmurs, even as her eyes close once more.

Madoka smiles in amusement. "Homura-chan?"

"Nn..."

"...Are you sure you should go back to sleep even though you woke up to go to the bathroom?"

She sees Homura frown, and hold both cat plushies closer.

"Homura-chan? You're kind of too old to be having accidents..."

Homura's eyes open. She sighs, and slowly sits up, moving the blankets away.

Madoka watches her closely. "Do you need help?"

Homura shakes her head. "I'm fine..." She leaves Amy and Tora by the pillow, and then swings her legs to lower them to the floor.

She pushes off the bed, and promptly stumbles, barely avoiding the desk nearby as she manages to catch herself against the wall.

Madoka scrambles off the bed, and is next to her in seconds. She slips her arm around Homura's waist.

"I-I'm okay," Homura mumbles, trying to pull away.

Madoka sighs. "Come on, I'll help you to the bathroom."

Homura squints at her, but before she can respond, Madoka is moving, and practically dragging her towards the bathroom.

They reach the door, and here, Homura straightens up. "I-I'm more awake," she says, face red. "I-I can go by myself."

Madoka eyes her. "Are you sure?"

"Y-Yes..."

"...Leave the door unlocked. If I hear anything strange, or if you take too long, I'm coming in."

Homura opens her mouth to protest, but one glance at Madoka's face, and she nods. "O-Okay..."

She disappears through the doorway, and a moment later, the door closes after her.

Madoka spends the next few minutes pacing around her room, ready at a moment's notice to rush in if she hears a crash.

Finally, when the door opens, she breathes a sigh of relief.

When Homura exits, she blinks when she sees her standing nearby. "I-I didn't take that long, did I?"

Madoka shakes her head. "No." She fidgets with her pajama shirt. "J-Just wanted to make sure you're okay..."

Homura nods slowly. "Uhm. W-Where are my glasses...?"

Madoka blinks. "They're right by the dresser. Aren't you going back to sleep?"

Homura is already walking to retrieve them, and Madoka trails after.

She stops once she notices Madoka behind her. "...Water," she says softly.

"I'll get it."

Homura blinks, but a pink blur is already heading out the door before she can stop her.

A confused look around, followed by a sigh.

She's sitting in bed, absently petting Amy when Madoka returns with a cup of water in her hands.

"Here you go, Homura-chan. Just tell me if you want more," Madoka tells her as she holds it towards her.

Lavender eyes squint as thin hands reach out. Madoka guides the cup to her hands, letting go once she's sure that Homura has a firm grasp on it.

Instead of heading back to her side of the bed, Madoka takes a seat nearby.

Homura sips at her water, ignoring how someone seems to be watching her every move.

It's when the last drop is gone, and Madoka is looking at her expectantly, that she turns to face her.

"Would you like more, Homura-chan?"

She shakes her head. "No, I'm fine," she murmurs, placing the cup onto the desk.

Madoka seems to deflate slightly, her hands bunching in her lap. "Are you going back to sleep now?"

Homura lifts Tora, pressing his soft belly into her face. "Madoka...?"

"Yes, Homura-chan?"

"I'm fine."

Madoka frowns.

Homura closes her eyes. "Earlier, was just a side effect of the medicine. It comes and goes. Some days are a bit worse than others."

The bed shifts, and when she opens her eyes, Madoka is sitting closer. She sees her reaching out, until her hand is on hers.

"Homura-chan... I'm just worried about you."

She sighs, and lowers Tora from her face, placing him on top of Madoka's hand. "I'm fine. Really. I know—what it feels like if there's something wrong. I was just tired. It happens."

Madoka turns to her, frustrated tears starting to form in her eyes. "H-How am I supposed to know that? I didn't even know about anything—until today! H-How—" she chokes, and wipes at her eyes angrily, knocking Tora from her hand to the bed.

Homura sighs. She watches as Madoka struggles to hold back her tears; it's one of the reasons why she didn't want to tell her.

She didn't want her to worry.

Carefully, she climbs out of bed.

Madoka sniffles, and follows Homura's movements, watching as she grabs the box of tissues by her dresser, before returning to her side.

The box is offered, and Madoka pulls out a few. She dabs at her eyes, still watching as Homura walks around the bed.

Her confusion only continues to grow as Homura gathers the books scattered on the blankets. With a neat pile in her arms, Homura disappears as she crouches to leave them on the floor, no doubt putting them next to her book bag.

The way Homura slowly stands has Madoka worried she's dizzy once more, but before she can ask, Homura moves, and approaches the lamp.

"I'm going to turn off the lights now, Madoka."

She remains quiet, and Homura takes that as permission to do so.

A click, and the room is suddenly shrouded in darkness.

She blinks rapidly, waiting for her eyes to readjust.

The shadows move, and she realizes that it's Homura; she can barely just see her with help from the moonlight peeking through the window.

The flow of air as Homura passes by, before the mattress shifts.

It's dark—but she can see her outline in front of her.

"Madoka? Uhm..." She hears a soft sigh, followed by a indistinguishable murmur. "C-Come here...?"

She's sure she has heard wrong. "W-What?"

Silence.

She jumps slightly when a hand is on her arm.

"S-Sorry," Homura murmurs, and she can hear the awkwardness seeping in her voice. "J-Just... c-come here...please?"

She blinks, but that hand is gently pulling her forward, and she moves with it.

Homura maneuvers her closer. "I think you're on the blanket... lift your leg?"

She does as told, and the blankets are pulled out from underneath her.

"There we go..." Homura murmurs.

"Homura-chan?"

The bed is moving, and she realizes that Homura is lying down. A second later, she feels a tug on her arm.

"H-Homura-chan?"

"L-Lie down here, Madoka."

"W-what?"

"J-Just—Madoka...?"

She feels her face growing warm. A deep breath, and after quickly confirming where Homura is, she settles in right next to her.

And it's not the first time she thinks how her own body seems to fit snugly against hers.

She feels Homura shift, and there's a small bit of air, before the blankets are pulled up.

More movement, and suddenly there's something soft tickling her cheek.

"Amy and Tora," Homura murmurs, answering her unasked question.

"Homura-chan...?"

The smell of strawberries—and she stiffens when she realizes that Homura has her face pressed close to her neck; another cute habit of hers.

She turns, and she can barely make out lavender that's peering at her.

Arms slip around her waist, and lavender disappears as Homura's eyes close.

"Goodnight, Madoka," Homura whispers.

She barely suppresses a shudder as she feels Homura's breath against her neck.

"G-Goodnight, Homura-chan..."

Sleep manages to elude her once more.

She remains staring at the ceiling, entirely too aware of Homura who is holding her as she sleeps.

Homura—is warm. This close, and she can hear and feel every breath; even the faint thrum of her steady heartbeat.

She closes her eyes, turning over to her side as her arms wrap around Homura's thin waist.

A soft murmur in her ear, and she smiles to herself.

As she drifts to sleep, she feels those arms around her tighten.

She sighs softly, content, as her consciousness slowly fades awa**y.**

AN: Monthly updatesss... cat's cradle will update, maybe next week, I hope. I think understand why I never finish stories. I have too many ideas...

As always, thanks for reading and reviewing! Really, thanks for all the encouraging comments; they always convince me to publish my stories/chapters on this site, instead of keeping everything to myself.

More MDHM, please.

She dreams of thunder.

Of sapphire, and crimson, and gold.

Of lavender.

Lavender—those sharp eyes that makes her heart flutter, and her stomach churn.

And all at once, everything disappears, and she finds herself alone.

Confusion, followed by realization when her fingers slip through nothing.

A loud buzz in her ear, that she tries her best to ignore as she still searches, seeking whatever she has lost.

It's a strange tune in her mind, and she can't concentrate as she struggles to break free.

All she knows is that whatever she has, is gone, and the tears are real as they prickle at the edge of her eyes.

"Homu—" Her eyes snap open, and darkness greets her.

She blinks in confusion, and something beneath her shifts.

"Nngh..."

A familiar voice.

Sleep still holds her close, and it takes a moment until she remembers last night.

"...Madoka...?"

Panicking, she immediately pulls away from the warm body she's all but lying on top of.

"S-Sorry, Homura-chan!"

"...The alarm...?"

She finally remembers, and understands what it was that has woken her.

"R-Right!"

With a bit of effort, she unwraps herself from the blankets, and manages to hit the off button on the alarm after the second attempt.

Silence rings in their ears, and she takes a moment to recollect her bearings. She glances at Homura, and she sighs in relief when she sees she's still lying down; that she hasn't noticed anything.

Her awkwardness is hers, and hers alone.

Cheeks slightly flushed, she moves off the bed. "I'll—brush my teeth first, Homura-chan, if you don't mind..."

"Okay..."

Once last check, before she all but dashes to the bathroom.

/

When she emerges from the bathroom, she's definitely more awake, and she finds Homura still lying in bed. The glasses now on her face tells her that she had at least made the effort to move.

Amy and Tora are draped in the crook of her neck, and she watches as Homura continues to sleep.

That is, until a sudden thought occurs. "Homura-chan?"

Homura shifts, and Amy and Tora move with her, sliding and rolling down the blankets.

"Hmm...?" she murmurs sleepily, hands patting the blankets as they try to locate the two plushies.

Madoka approaches her in worry, brows now furrowed. "Are you alright?"

Something about Madoka's tone has her eyes slowly blinking open. "...What?"

Madoka reaches out, her hand on Homura's forehead as she feels for her temperature.

"...Madoka?"

"You don't seem to have a fever," Madoka mumbles as she pulls her hand away. "I'll get the thermometer though, just in case. I should've checked earlier, when I woke up...!"

Homura blinks as she hears the anger now in Madoka's voice. Still confused, she slowly sits up, and watches with squinted eyes as Madoka starts digging through the drawers, searching for something.

"I know it's here, somewhere..."

"Madoka...? What's wrong?"

Madoka ignores her, now frantically shoving items aside in her haste.

Homura moves off the bed, and barely manages to catch Madoka's arm before she turns to exit the room.

"Madoka? What's wrong?"

Madoka turns to her, worry clearly written on her face. "You shouldn't be up, Homura-chan! What if—"

Something clicks, and Homura realizes that Madoka's worries have carried over from yesterday. A brief debate, before she leans forward, and wraps her arms around Madoka.

It serves its purpose, and Madoka immediately freezes.

"H-Homura-chan?"

"I'm fine," she murmurs, glad that Madoka is unable to see her face. "You know how it usually takes me a while to wake up."

"But—"

"Seriously, Madoka. I'm fine."

"But what if—"

Homura forces her embarrassment away, and pulls back to look at her.

Apprehension, and lips tugged into a frown.

If it was anyone else, she would be tempted to roll her eyes.

Instead, she tries to give Madoka a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, I remember what I told you yesterday. I'll call my doctor, and ask them about my medication."

"Homu—"

She doesn't let her finish and lets go. "After I wash my face..." she murmurs.

"Homur—"

"I'll be right back, Madoka."

Madoka watches as Homura heads towards the bathroom.

Before she disappears through the doorway, she turns back. "Don't worry, I'll leave the door unlocked."

Madoka blinks, but the door is already closing shut.

/

As she waits for her call to be transferred, her eyes follow Madoka as she paces around the room. She's muttering things to herself, and it only serves to amuse Homura; she had always suspected Madoka as being a worrier, but she's never actually been at the receiving end—at least not to this extent.

She hears the click on the line, and turns her attention back to her phone.

As she starts discussing her situation with her doctor, the bed dips lightly, and a quick glance over confirms that Madoka is now sitting right next to her.

She feels her lean against her shoulder, and after a moment, she realizes that Madoka is trying to eavesdrop.

She raises an eyebrow at her, and Madoka immediately backs off, face flushing in embarrassment.

"Yes," she murmurs into the phone even as she continues to watch her. "Alright, I will see you then. Thank you."

The line disconnects, and her phone closes the connection.

She lowers the device to her lap.

"W-What did he say?" Madoka asks as she fidgets under Homura's gaze.

"..He wants me to go in for a few tests."

Madoka nods. "That's—good."

Homura places her phone onto the bed, before she stands. "...Anyways, let's go eat breakfast. I'm surprisingly hungry."

Madoka frowns. "W-What? You're supposed to go see your doctor, Homura-chan!"

Homura tilts her head. "My appointment is at 10:45, Madoka."

She opens her mouth to protest, but Homura holds out her hand.

"They want me in there before I take my medicine—which is at 11, if you remember."

Madoka's mouth snaps shut at the reminder as she glares to the side.

Homura sighs even her own lips twitch in amusement. "...You know, if it was anyone else, I definitely wouldn't find this amusing."

The glare is suddenly directed at her, and Homura visibly flinches.

She clears her throat. "Uhm, that is... w-what I mean is... uhm..."

Madoka suddenly exhales, and the action seems to draw her anger away. "...I know... t-that I'm acting... irrational. It's just—" she cuts herself off as she feels the words catch in her throat.

She remembers her dream.

"Ah..." Homura raises her hands, looking unsure as Madoka seems ready to cry again. "Uhm, I mean..." she glances away, before turning back. "...Thank you, Madoka."

Madoka blinks, forgetting her tears at Homura's words. "W-What?"

Homura avoids looking at her, and is instead concentrating on the floor. She's twisting the ends of hair in her hands: a clear sign of nerves.

"T-That is... thank you, for worrying about me. It's... I mean, I don't... you shouldn't, really, not... not for someone like me..."

Madoka is suddenly in front of her, grasping her hands tightly.

Her eyes are fierce, and it's not the first time that Homura thinks that she's *scary,* and that she prefers happy Madoka more.

"Don't you even dare talk about yourself that way, Homura-chan!"

Homura takes a step back. "U-Uhm—"

Madoka takes a step forward. "You're an amazing person! And an amazing friend! Of course I would worry about you!"

"O-Okay—" Another step back as Madoka follows after her.

"I mean, okay, sometimes the things you say may be kind of harsh, but I know that you only really mean it half the time! A-And sometimes you're kind of asocial, but that's also another defense mechanism of yours!"

"U-Uhm—"

She's running out of space to escape to, and somehow she finds her back now pressed against the wall as Madoka stares her down.

"M-Mado—"

"—And, I know we haven't known each other for that long, Homura-chan, but how can you even say that about yourself?!"

"U-Uhm..." Her eyes dart to everywhere but straight ahead. "T-That, uhm—I-I'm sorry...?" she squeaks out.

It's then that Madoka finally realizes that she's definitely standing in Homura's personal space—that she's a bit too close, and that Homura is staring at her in fear.

She immediately jumps back as she lets go of her hands.

"S-Sorry, Homura-chan!"

Homura sighs in relief.

Madoka's face softens. "It's..."

Homura looks up.

Madoka smiles. "...Of course I would worry about you."

Her honest words has Homura's cheeks turning pink as she averts her eyes. "Ah... Uhm... T-Thank you..."

There's a gentle hand on her wrist, and she turns to Madoka who's still smiling. "...Why don't we get breakfast, Homura-chan?"

She nods, and isn't surprised when Madoka takes her hand.

Fingers intertwined, she follows her out of the room.

\\

When they reach the kitchen, Madoka helps the grumbling Homura clear the counter of Sayaka's belongings.

"...She doesn't even live here," Homura says as she accepts the last notebook from Madoka. She neatly stacks it on top of the other books, before pushing them off to the side. "...Thank goodness."

Madoka shakes her head in amusement as she walks over to the refrigerator.

"Should we just heat up some leftovers for breakfast, Homura-chan?" she asks as she pulls open the refrigerator door.

"...Curry sounds kind of heavy in the morning," Homura murmurs absently. She dusts off her hands, before she moves to join Madoka.

Madoka nods. "So does pizza... but, I don't really like the idea of salad for breakfast either..."

There's one more box, and they both eye it.

They both shake their heads a moment later.

Homura steps away as Madoka closes the refrigerator door.

"Uhm..." Pink eyes rove around the kitchen, stopping when she catches sight of a familiar box lined next to the spices. "Oh!"

Homura glances at her, one hand now holding a carafe as she prepares to fill it with water for the coffee maker.

"Pancakes?" Madoka asks as she reaches for the box of mix.

Homura gives her a wary look.

Madoka grins. "It should be okay; we haven't had them in a while. Maybe this time I'll be able to make a rabbit without burning it!"

Knowing Madoka's mind is made up, Homura hums lightly as she heads over to the sink. "Should we wake Sleeping Beauty?"

"Ah." Madoka glances over to the couch. "Mm... maybe when it's closer to being finished?"

"Alright."

/

Homura sips at her hot chocolate, wishing for a different drink, but Madoka had all but glared at her when she had reached for the coffee.

...She'll just buy some later.

As she drinks, she's watching as Madoka tries her hand at 'drawing' with the pancake batter. She's concentrating on the open pan, hands griping the handle of the plastic pitcher as she slowly pours out the liquid.

The sight reminds Homura of their last attempt almost a month ago. Madoka had tried the same thing, and the pancakes had ended burnt, yet somehow still undercooked. Her stomach gurgles lightly as she remembers how that had tasted.

And the attempts before that...

She shakes her head.

She hears Madoka murmur something to herself. Slightly curious, Homura lowers her body from the stool, and moves to join her side.

Experience has her making sure that Madoka knows she's standing right by her, before she speaks.

"How is it?"

Madoka glances over with a small smile on her lips. "Seems okay. I remembered to make the heat lower this time."

"Mm..." Homura takes another sip.

She notices that Madoka is still staring, and tilts her head. A glance down, and she puts two and two together.

She holds out her cup as Madoka blinks at her.

"Would you like a sip, Madoka?"

"E-Eh?"

Homura merely brings the cup closer until all Madoka can do is drink. She swallows her protests, and feels her cheeks burning as her lips contact the same area that Homura's had touched moments ago.

And she's not surprised to find that her favourite drink tastes like *nothing*.

Once sure Madoka is done, Homura pulls the cup away.

She glances down to the pan and notices that bubbles have started forming within the circle of batter. "...I think it's done?"

Madoka starts, and immediately reaches for the spatula waiting to the side. Her hand knocks into the pitcher, and she watches in horror as it tips over.

Homura tries to catch it as Madoka tries to do the same.

Knuckles rap against ceramic, and the cup slips from Homura's hand.

The hollow crashing sound as the cup shatters on impact, and they both jump as liquid splatters onto their bare feet.

Homura stares at the floor, where there's now a large puddle of hot chocolate pooled in between them. Her hand is still held to her side as she mimes holding her cup.

Madoka sighs. "...Pancakes."

"Pancakes," Homura agrees.

\\

Though she knows her hair is sticking up, she ignores it.

She's busy watching Homura and Madoka work as they clean the mess that had woken her up.

She tries to stifle a laugh, but fails, and Homura shoots her a glare.

"You two. How often does this happen that you already have cleaning down to a tee?" Sayaka asks them.

Her grin grows when she sees Madoka blush.

"...Often enough," Madoka admits.

"Godoka strikes again!" Sayaka says loudly.

"...You could help too you know," Homura replies as she accepts a batter soaked cloth from Madoka, and exchanges it with a clean one.

Sayaka watches as Homura walks to the sink. "Nah, I'd just get in your way. You both already know what you're doing."

Homura frowns. She agrees with her, but she hates that tone in her voice. She turns on the faucet, and continuously wrings out the water from the cloth.

Once the water rinses clear, she shuts off the water, before she heads back towards Madoka.

"Guess we'll just have pizza for brea—" she hisses as something sharp stabs her foot.

Madoka immediately turns to her. "Homura-chan?"

She lifts her foot, and turns it over to find a piece of ceramic now jabbed into her heel.

"Ouch." Sayaka winces in sympathy.

"How did I miss this?" Homura murmurs as she stares.

"Stop staring, Homura-chan!"

She hops on one foot as Madoka steers her away from the stove to the chair. She's pushed to the seat, and a second later, Madoka is rushing to retrieve the first aid kit from the bathroom.

"Don't pull it out yet, Homura-chan!" Madoka reminds her as she disappears into the living room.

She barely manages to stop her hands from doing just that. "Ah." She quickly looks around for a tissue instead.

Sayaka hands her one from the box on the counter.

"Thanks," she murmurs, her attention now on dabbing at the bit of blood dribbling out.

"...You know, sometimes I wonder if you're more clumsy than Madoka," Sayaka says as she stares at her curiously.

Homura glances at her briefly. "...How does this make me more clumsy than Madoka?"

Sayaka ignores her question, and instead offers her a grin. "Actually, you know, you're the reason why Madoka's so clumsy."

She blinks. "...What?"

More tissues are held out, and Homura takes them as she continue to stare.

Sayaka shrugs. "Well, you'll figure it out..." she pauses. "I hope."

"W—"

"Found it!" Madoka calls out from the living room.

A moment later, with her hands around a plastic container, she's making her way towards the kitchen.

Homura glances back to Sayaka, only to find her standing.

"Wai—"

Her chair is turned, and Madoka is now in front of her.

"Have to clean it thoroughly so there's less chance of an infection, Homura-chan," Madoka murmurs as she quickly snaps open the lid.

Homura glances over, and Sayaka is already walking away. She sighs, before she faces Madoka who now holds a pair of tweezers in one hand, and a bottle of rubbing alcohol in the other.

"Uhm... Whatever I did, I'm sorry," Homura says suddenly.

Madoka's lips twitch in amusement. "Homura-chan?"

"Uhm, so, I'll just take care of this myself." Homura reaches over, trying to retrieve the tweezers from Madoka.

Madoka merely narrows her eyes. "Homura-chan."

She bows her head. "...I mean, thank you, Madoka, for helping me."

Madoka pats Homura's knee. "Of course, Homura-chan."

\\

It's not too bad of a wound, but enough pressure on her foot makes walking uncomfortable.

Madoka sweeps the kitchen floor once more, and she finds a few more shards hidden in the crevice beneath the stove.

She frowns as she tips the dust pan above the trash can, watching as those pieces of ceramic disappear inside.

"It's a good thing it wasn't glass; the wound would've been a lot deeper," she says as she moves to return the broom to the side of the pantry.

Homura nods in agreement. "Yes, luckily." She flexes her foot, testing her bandages to see her added limitations. "...I probably shouldn't wear my boots today."

"Mmhmm," Madoka agrees. "You should let one of the nurses look at it too, just in case."

"I suppose..." Homura glances up when she hears rustling: Madoka is pulling out the leftovers from the refrigerator.

"So much for pizza and curry being too heavy for breakfast..." she hears Madoka murmur.

"I'll help, Madoka." Homura moves to step off the stool.

"Nope, just leave it to me, Homura-chan. Sit back down."

She frowns. "My foot is fine, Madoka. You saw it, it was a very small piece."

Homura jumps when a hand clamps down on her shoulder. She turns, only to find Sayaka, who looks a lot more awake now, grinning at her.

"Just let her spoil you, Homura. It's something you should get used to as well."

"...What?"

"Why don't you come help me, Sayaka-chan," Madoka calls over with gritted teeth.

Homura moves, but Sayaka pushes her back into her seat.

She ignores Homura's glare, and steps into the kitchen.

"Sure, Madoka," Sayaka says as she readjusts the towel over her shoulders. "Wouldn't want you dropping more stuff today."

Madoka responds by shoving the pizza box at Sayaka when she's close enough, and she winces as cardboard hits her stomach.

"Ow..."

Madoka turns to Homura with a beaming smile. "Breakfast will be ready in a bit, Homura-chan."

Homura tilts her head, not for the first time thinking that those two had a strange relationship, despite their status as being 'best friends.'

She doesn't know any better though.

"...Uhm, okay, Madoka. T-Thank you..."

/

Full, and now dressed for the day, Homura sits by the front door, slipping on her sneakers even though she can see her usual pair of boots with a side glance.

A quick re-lace, before she slowly gets to her feet. She taps the front of her shoes, readjusting the fit.

She places tentative pressure on her heel, and it stings enough that she knows she'll be limping slightly as she walks.

"Guess this means you won't be sending me off at the train station, eh, Homura?"

She turns around to find Sayaka standing nearby. "Yes," she answers as she pulls at the sleeves of her jacket.

Sayaka sighs. "Too bad. Well, I'll see you next week then." She holds out her arms.

Homura eyes her warily. "...What are you doing?"

Sayaka stares at her as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. "What? You're not gonna leave without giving me a hug, are you?"

Homura returns a blank look. "...Why would I give you a hug?"

"What?" Sayaka places a hand to her forehead as she tilts her head back. "Homura's... Homura's not going to give me a hug? Even though we're so close now?"

Standing by the couch, Madoka covers her mouth as she tries to hide her laugh.

She's only half successful when she sees lavender flicker her way.

"...We're not close," Homura replies as she turns around.

"You give Madoka hugs all the time!" Sayaka shouts, and Homura only turns back because it actually sounds like Sayaka is offended.

She briefly glances to Madoka, who's still watching. Still smiling. "...You mean Madoka gives me hugs all the time."

Sayaka takes a step closer. "Yeah, so let me give you a hug then."

"P-Pass," Homura mumbles as she turns back to the door.

"We're practically best friends now, Homura!" Sayaka says, and Homura shivers as she realizes that Sayaka sounds closer. "*Homu-chan.*"

Scowling, Homura whirls around. "Don't call me—" To her embarrassment, she lets out a small squeak when she finds Sayaka right in front of her.

"Half a hug?" Sayaka asks as she holds out one arm instead.

Clearing her throat, Homura tugs at her jacket as she tries to control her blush. "W-Why are you so insistent on this hug, Miki Sayaka? We are—" she leans back as Sayaka leans forward, "w-we aren't close...!"

Sayaka grins, obviously very amused. "Sure we are. You saved me when I arrived at the train station. Telling me where to go when you could've just left me there. And then you went out of your way to give me advice. I mean, how else could I repay you? Let me hug you, Homura-chan!"

"D-Don't—" She takes a step back, but placing her full weight on her injured heel makes her wince.

"Homura-chan? Are you okay?" Madoka's concerned voice has her straightening up.

She quickly steps on her other foot. "Yes, I'm fine..."

Madoka grabs Sayaka's arm, and pulls her away. "Sayaka-chan, stop teasing Homura-chan already. She needs to go or else she's going to be late."

Sayaka sighs, but relents. "Fine, fine." She grins. "I'll just hug you when I come back next week."

Homura readjusts her jacket collar, trying to clear the sudden warmth that's surrounding her neck. "I'm sure there are other people you'd like to hug when you come back next week." She smirks lightly when she sees Sayaka stiffen. "In particular, someone red, and—"

Sayaka holds out her arms. "Nope, maybe I'll just save *all* my hugs for you—"

Madoka comes to Homura's rescue, pulling Sayaka back by grabbing her shirt. "Sayaka-chan!"

"Fine! But you won't be so lucky next week, Homura!" Sayaka says as she crosses her arms across her chest.

"I'll make sure not to be here then," Homura mutters as she reaches for the door knob.

"...Homura-chan?"

She turns around. "Yes, Madoka?"

"Are you sure you'll be okay going there by yourself?"

She sighs. "Yes, I will be fine, Madoka."

Madoka bites her lip. "But..."

Even though she knows Sayaka is watching, Homura steps closer to place her hands on Madoka's shoulders. "I am fine. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Madoka."

"...I know, but..."

"...You worry too much, but thank you for your concern."

Sayaka grins. "She'll probably worry less if you give her a hug!"

Homura shoots her a glare. "Shouldn't you be packing?"

"I have time~"

"Anyways," Homura turns back to Madoka, and pauses when she sees her holding out her arms. "..."

Madoka gives her a shy smile. "It would help..."

Homura mumbles something under her breath, before she leans forward and hesitantly wraps her arms around Madoka. Madoka responds by hugging her tightly, and remains holding her even though Homura tries to pull away.

"...Madoka?"

"Ah." Sheepishly, she lets go. "Message me when you get there?"

Homura clears her throat, ignoring Sayaka's very blatant catcalls. "Yes. I will see you later." Her eyes flickers over to Sayaka. "...Have a safe trip home."

"See, I knew you cared!"

Homura scowls, and quickly walks to the door. "Lose one idiot, gain another..."

"Bye, Homura-chan!"

A wave of her hand as a response, before the door shuts close.

Madoka glances away as Sayaka turns to her. "Hmmm?"

"W-What?"

Sayaka grins. "Maybe, you two worked something out because you slept together?"

Madoka turns to her with wide eyes. "Sleep! That's all we did! *Sleep*!"

Sayaka places her hands behind her head, and starts walking towards the kitchen. "Uh huh."

"S-Sayaka-chan!"

/

A few steps from the apartment, and all emotion is wiped from her face. Her hands are tucked into her jacket pockets, fingers grasping her medication as she makes her way towards the familiar bus stop.

It's warm today, and she regrets ever so briefly not wearing something lighter; summer is soon, she knows.

She can almost taste it in the air.

When she reaches the bus stop, there's a few people still milling about, informing her that she isn't too late. In fact, she's just on time; her bus arrives a minute later. She shuffles to the end of the line, and waits to board. Once it's her turn, she slides her bus pass through the scanner, before she takes a seat towards the back.

It's a quick ride down a familiar route, where her stop leaves her a block away from the ever familiar hospital. She walks slower today, but it still feels like she arrives all too soon.

She reaches the double doors, and they open to welcome her inside. She remains glued to her spot, unwilling to take that step forward.

A few years prior, she had assumed she wouldn't need to see this place anymore.

Her mind had been made up then.

She moves to the side, ignoring glances thrown her way as other people enter.

She knows that if she takes any longer, she's going to be late.

A slow exhale.

She takes out her phone to inform Madoka of her arrival. Her phone chimes moments after the message is sent, and a small smile tugs at her lips when she sees Madoka's response.

She sends out another reply, before she shuts off her phone. Once it's off, she slips it back into her pocket.

Her smile disappears, and she finally moves forward.

\\

She checks in at the front desk, and the nurse that's usually working when she visits is not here.

It's someone younger, maybe kinder.

She's given the room number where she should wait, and after a polite bow, she heads down the familiar hallways.

The familiar smell of antiseptic.

The familiar glow as lights bounce off white walls.

Usually, it's the click of her heels in her ears as she walks, but today she's wearing sneakers, and when she takes a turn a bit too fast, there's a squeak as the rubber soles slide along polished floors.

Nurses pass her, ones pushing metal carts, ones without. Patients and visitors exiting and entering rooms. Doctors rushing past as they move to meet other appointments.

She spots the room placard, and sighs once more.

Her hand grips her jacket, before it relaxes as she steps inside.

/

There's a hospital gown waiting for her, and she draws the privacy curtain before she changes.

The nurse arrives shortly after, and she has her blood pressure taken.

Her temperature.

Weight.

Asked the usual, familiar questions.

Numbers are punched into her file, as other things are checked off. The nurse smiles at her, before she disappears once more.

She's fidgeting with the flimsy fabric of her shirt when her doctor finally arrives, greeting her with a familiar smile.

He's been handling her case ever since her transplant, and is maybe one of the few adults in her life that she trusts.

He has a daughter a few years older than her, and his words are sincere and kind when he asks her how she has been; they meet monthly now, which is a good thing, because seeing him more often would mean that things are wrong.

As she stares at his familiar face that seems older, she remembers, years ago, when he had first asked her how she felt about her transplant.

If she had wanted to go through with it.

She had asked him instead if it was scary to die.

He had smiled—and told her that it's scarier to live.

Years later—now—she's starting to understand what he had meant.

"Hm, you're due next week for blood work, but we'll take care of that today too."

She nods.

He lowers his projection screen, his warm eyes crinkling as they stare at her.
"...And how has school been?"

She tilts her head. "Okay."

"You're majoring in Computer Science, if I recall."

"Yes."

"Are you passing all your subjects?"

"Yes."

"Good, good."

She nods.

"And how is your friend?"

She regrets ever mentioning her to him.

She glances away. "...She is fine."

He smiles. "I'm glad to hear that." He notes the time. "Time for your medication, Homura-chan."

She reaches for her jacket, and moments later, she's drawing out a small plastic container that holds her medicine.

He double checks her dosage, before handing her one of the water bottles waiting on the desk.

"Thank you," she murmurs quietly.

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"We still have a few hours until you leave, Sayaka-chan," Madoka tells her as she pulls up her socks. "What would you like to do?"

Sayaka is lying on the couch with her eyes closed, still in her sleeping clothes. She throws one arm up. "Whatever."

"Mm..." Madoka readjusts her sweatshirt—another one borrowed from Homura. "They just finished remodeling one of the sections at the station. We could grab lunch there after looking around?"

"Sure."

Madoka waits for Sayaka to get up, but when she remains on the couch, she approaches her. "...Or you could sleep until your train arrives?"

"...That sounds good too."

"We still have plenty of leftovers... You could help finish them, since I don't think Homura-chan would want to eat pizza again..."

Sayaka opens her eyes as she suddenly sits up. "Wait, actually, I need to buy some souvenirs for my parents. My mom was really angry when I left so last minute. Maybe those chocolates you brought back last time? My mom really liked them."

"Sure." Madoka nods in agreement. "The shop is inside, but I'll just buy a temp pass."

Sayaka reluctantly stands to her feet. "Okay, let me get dressed, and we'll go."

"Alright."

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They take the bus to the station, and when they arrive, they both remain quiet when they pass the familiar yellow sign.

A glance to the tinted doors, and there's another sign that says 'Open.'

Madoka increases her pace, and Sayaka follows after her.

Once clear of that particular shop, Madoka slows down and leads Sayaka towards the kiosks, where she purchases two tickets: a temporary pass, allowing her access to the station, as well as a one way ticket to Mitakihara.

As soon as they clear the entrance, they locate the public lockers. They store Sayaka's luggage inside, before they spend the next few hours walking and browsing through the stores.

It's mostly aimless window shopping where they enjoy each other's company, and the only purchases they make are the chocolates for Sayaka's parents.

Madoka's stomach grumbles, and she blushes when Sayaka turns to her.

"Lunch?"

Madoka nods. "This small Udon bar opened up recently, supposedly it's pretty good..."

"Sure, let's try that."

Luckily, they miss the rush, and the line is small when they arrive. When they place their orders, two spots at the bar clears, and soon, they're standing and eating, watching through the windows as trains leave the station.

The atmosphere is nice and the food is delicious; Madoka decides that she'll take Homura here one day.

Maybe when they take their trip this summer.

As soon as they finish, there's still twenty minutes until Sayaka's train will arrive. They return to the lockers, and retrieve Sayaka's luggage before they head over to the platform to wait.

Sayaka stretches her arms above her head. "This weekend was everything I could ask for." She turns to Madoka with a sheepish grin. "Thanks again, Madoka. I'm sorry that I dropped by so last minute..."

Madoka waves away her concerns. "You know you're always welcomed here, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka throws her arm around Madoka's shoulders, and hugs her close. "Seriously, how can someone like me be so lucky? I don't know what I was thinking, going after Kyousuke! I knew I should've just married you after high school!"

Madoka blushes, already knowing that they're gaining looks because Sayaka is deliberately being loud. "S-Sayaka-chan..."

Sayaka sighs, but keeps her hold on Madoka. "But now, I actually have competition." She places a hand to her chin. "I could definitely throw Homura though."

Madoka pinches Sayaka's side.

"Ouch!"

"You're not throwing Homura-chan anywhere, Sayaka-chan."

"I could, though," Sayaka insists.

"...Well, yes, but it doesn't mean that you're allowed to!"

Sayaka sighs, leaning against Madoka. "...Maybe I should transfer to Tokyo."

Madoka stares at her in surprise. "E-Eh? Sayaka-chan...?"

Sayaka remains staring ahead at the empty train tracks. "You know, they always say that after high school, that's when life begins. A couple more years, and we'll be attending our 'Coming of Age Ceremony,' but even thinking about it... I can't imagine what will happen next week, let alone next year..."

She sighs, and closes her eyes, slouching down until her head rests against Madoka's.

"I don't even know what I'm doing in my life. Right now I'm barely passing all my subjects, and the only thing I'm actually good at is softball. I'm not like you, Madoka. I don't... I don't have a goal. I don't know what I'm doing..."

Madoka wraps her arm around Sayaka's waist. "Sayaka-chan?"

Sayaka suddenly straightens out, one hand now rubbing the back of head. "Just kidding! I already know that I still have time to decide. Plus," she grins at Madoka who's still staring at her in worry, "if I moved here, I'd probably feel like a third wheel, what with you and Homura and all..."

Though she knows Sayaka is deliberately trying to brush off everything, Madoka can't keep the blush from her cheeks. "S-Sayaka-chan!"

Sayaka pulls away from Madoka just as a chime rings overhead.

An automated voice announces the arrival of the train that Sayaka will be boarding, and there's shuffling as people start moving towards the yellow line.

"Ah." Madoka turns to Sayaka and leans forward, wrapping her arms around her. "...Whatever you decide, Sayaka-chan, you know you're always welcomed here."

Sayaka returns the hug. "Thank you, Madoka."

They pull apart as the train turns the corner and slowly slides into view.

"Have a safe trip back, Sayaka-chan," Madoka tells her as she squeezes her hand, before letting go.

"You too, Madoka."

They grin at one another, and for a second, Madoka is reminded of the Sayaka that had befriended her how many years ago.

She blinks, and that memory disappears, replaced with an older Sayaka, who she finds is still the same, deep down.

The slow whine against the tracks informs her that the train is approaching, and Madoka knows she needs to move now, otherwise she'll be dragged along with the flow of traffic.

"Bye, Sayaka-chan! Message me when you reach your transfer!"

"Sure! See you, Madoka!"

She's shoving her way past the crowds, and she can already hear the teasing from Homura as she struggles to break through.

Somehow, she manages to reach the escalators. She breathes a sigh of relief once she's in the clear. When she looks back, she catches sight of the doors closing. Moments later, the train is moving, and carrying Sayaka back to Mitakihara.

She continues watching until the train disappears round the corner, before she turns, and joins the others exiting the platfor**m.**

AN: Well... thanks for reading, and thank you for reviewing... cat's cradle update most likely next week, sometime before the 20th or so... ?

The click as she unlocks the door, before she pushes it open. Silence greets her, but she was expecting it: a text earlier from Homura had told her that she would probably be back closer to evening. She retrieves her keys, and then shuts the door, locking it behind her.

She slips off her shoes, only to place them into their waiting spot on the shoe rack, right next to where Homura's shoes should be. A quick glance around, followed by a slow exhale. With hours to wait, she figures that she might as well distract herself by finishing her homework.

A small stretch of her arms as she walks to her room to get changed.

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Dressed in her oversized jersey, she drops onto the couch with her backpack in hand. After turning the projection screen on as background noise, she finally digs out the sheet of math problems. She frowns at what little progress she had made last night, before shaking her head.

It takes a while, and occasionally she glances at the clock to check the time, but eventually she finds herself lost in equations and numbers.

She's mumbling to herself, grumbling because the numbers aren't adding up, when her phone rings. She jumps, and the book tumbles out of her lap. She tries to catch it, but misses, and sighs when it falls to the floor.

The ringing continues, and she looks around, searching for her phone. She finds it hidden in between the couch cushions.

"Ahh, don't hang up," she says as her finger pokes the accept button, not bothering to check who it is. "Hello?"

"Hey, how's my city girl doing?"

"Mama!"

"How are you, Madoka?"

She sits back against the couch, smiling at the familiar voice. "Good, I guess, though I could be better. How are you, Mama?"

"Mm, I could be better too. That bald head from PR keeps butting into my work, but other than that, not too bad."

She grins. "What's up?"

"What? A mother can't just call her daughter just to chat?"

"N-No, of course you can!"

She hears her mother laugh. "I'm kidding. I actually wanted to see if you're going to be back for Tatsuya's birthday party?"

"Ahh," she glances to the adjacent wall, where there's a paper calender hanging, "that's—in three weeks, right?"

"Mmhmm."

She chews on her lower lip. "Mm... it's kind of cutting it close to finals..."

"Say no more, Madoka. Your studies are important; I'm sure Takkun will understand."

"Is he there?"

"Nope. Soccer practice."

"Ah, uhm, tell him I'm really sorry for not being able to go!"

"Of course. Actually, he doesn't want you to be there."

"Whaat? Why not?"

"Because," and she can hear the sing-song tone in her mother's voice, "it appears that Takkun has a girlfriend."

She sits up immediately. "What?!"

He had one before she did?!

"Well, I'm still trying to get the details from him. All I know is that her name is Himawari."

She grins. "That's a cute name. How'd you find out?"

"Well, apparently she's on his soccer team. I'm going to be picking him up in a little bit; I'll give you more details after I find out more."

"Makes me want to come home just to meet her."

"Will you be coming back for the summer?"

"Mm," she reaches over, picking up her book from the floor, before sitting back down, "maybe for a week or two. I was thinking about taking some supplemental classes...? Uhm, if that's alright...? They're—kind of expensive..."

"You know what I told you about money, Madoka. Mama works hard for a reason: so that you two won't have to. Take as many as you want, as long as they will help lead you to what you want to do."

She knows she's lucky. "Thank you, Mama."

"Mmhmm. Of course. Now, will Homura be coming along with you?"

She blushes, sinking deeper into the couch. "Uhm... I'm not sure. I haven't asked her..." It had crossed her mind, but she wasn't sure if Homura would be up to it.

"She's always welcomed here. Is she there?"

"N-No, she's... out at the moment."

"Really?"

She smiles, remembering the few times Homura had tried to pretend that she wasn't home. "Yes, she's at her doctor's..." The smile drops when she's reminded why Homura isn't here.

"...Is everything okay?"

Madoka sighs, leaning back to stare at the ceiling. "Y-Yeah. Well, yes, and no, I guess..."

"Madoka."

She sighs again. "Uhm... don't you have to go pick up Takkun soon?"

"I have time. Now, tell me what's wrong?"

"Okay," she breathes out. "So, uhm... Sayaka-chan dropped by this weekend—"

"She did?"

"Yeah—"

"Let me guess, Kamijou-kun?"

"Uh huh," she closes the book in her lap, before placing it down to the side, "so uhm... okay, Sayaka-chan didn't have enough money for the taxi ride to our apartment, so she called me to pick her up..."

"Uh huh."

"...And then, Homura-chan had her wait at this bar by the station, because it's not that safe—"

"Good. I've been hearing about those robberies."

"Okay, but, the bar—apparently that's where Homura-chan's brother—uhm... half brother works at."

"I see."

"So, then, later, when I was talking to Sayaka-chan, we were uhm... I was telling her how you told me that Kamijou-kun is too selfish..."

"Right."

"And Sayaka-chan was saying that I should be selfish too, about Homura-chan, because apparently I know nothing about her! Not even the fact that her half brother is in the same city; Homura-chan has never mentioned him, at all!"

"Okay..."

She stands from the couch, restless as she's reminded how much of Homura she doesn't know. "Okay, b-but that's not even the worst part though, Mama! Homura-chan—even though she's been living here for months, a-and I've known her for this long now, I just barely found out that she had a heart transplant when she was younger!"

She starts pacing across the room.

"She was hiding her medication from me, a-and deliberately keeping it a secret! I think if I hadn't asked her, she wouldn't have told me! Ever!"

"Okay... first off, I need you to calm down, Madoka."

She stops walking. "I'm—"

"*Madoka*. Take a deep breath. Come on, Mama can wait."

She sighs, before she inhales deeply.

"Okay, now breathe out, slowly."

She exhales through her mouth, her breath creating static heard through the speaker.

"Good. Now, I want you to think about this rationally: was what Homura did, really that bad?"

She opens her mouth—

"*Madoka*. Remember what I told you about letting your emotions control you?"

She clamps her mouth shut as a frustrated growl emerges from her throat. "... I know."

"Now, people are entitled to their secrets. I'm sure that Sayaka-chan doesn't tell you every little thing, does she?"

She glances to the floor. "...No."

"And, considering just how shy and shut off Homura is, did you really expect her to tell you something like that? ...Voluntarily, I mean."

She rubs her eyes, hearing the truth in her mother's words, but not liking it all the same. "...No."

"...It doesn't mean you don't have a right to be upset. You're an honest girl, Madoka, which, is very, very rare nowadays. Knowing you though, you probably blew this out of proportion, and took it as a personal attack because she didn't tell you about her heart transplant, hmm?"

"...Maybe," she mumbles softly.

"And you've known Homura for how long now?"

"...H-Half a year."

"Mmhmm. Maybe you should be happy that she trusts you enough, that she's willing to be open about something that has probably affected her all her life."

She guiltily casts her eyes to the floor. "..."

Her mother laughs. "Now, don't go pouting at me for pointing this out."

"I know," she sighs.

"But, other than that, is everything alright with Homura? Is there a reason she's at her doctor's?"

"Mm, she gets dizzy after she takes her medication, so she's getting that checked out at the hospital."

"And?"

"Other than that... she—seems okay..."

"That's good to hear. Speaking of Homura, how are things going along with her? You two seem closer, or, at least you know more about her now?"

She drops down on the couch, her movements causing the books on the cushions to slide from the sudden disturbance. "We... kind of had a date, this weekend...?"

"Oh?"

She can just picture her mother grinning with her eyebrows raised, and she blushes. "K-Kind of... Sayaka-chan wanted to go to the game center, and then we split up..."

"Did you two have fun?"

"...Yes," she admits quietly.

"Well, then what seems to be the problem?"

She sighs, and presses a hand to her warm cheek. "It's—it's just so hard to read her sometimes, Mama. Like, Sayaka-chan says that Homura-chan's only nice to me —"

"I noticed that too, actually."

"Really?"

"Uh huh. And I'm not so sure it's because she has known you the longest; even with Takkun, she was very apprehensive when dealing him, which is strange, because he's just a smaller, male version of you."

She grins. "Don't let him hear you say that, Mama."

"He should be flattered he's growing up to be like his older sister!"

"Okay, so, she's just... I don't know, I can't tell, does she like me? I mean, she's so confusing sometimes! I mean, it *feels* like she likes me, but there's—nothing really to compare her behavior with. Does she only act this way with me?"

She hears her mother laugh again. "Well, Homura *is* fairly hard to read. Actually, I suspect there's an underlying cause to why she acts the way she does."

She blinks. "What do you mean, Mama?"

"Hmm. It's little things, Madoka. It could be read off as her being shy, but, she seemed very afraid of me and your Papa."

She frowns. "Yeah... she was scared of meeting Sayaka-chan too, the first time."

"Well, I don't want to make any assumptions about her, but those few times you left her alone with us... hm, how do I explain it? She was, kind of like a cornered animal. I was honestly expecting for her to run out the door if you took a minute longer."

"You never mentioned this, Mama. Homura-chan doesn't act like that with me..." She remembers this morning, and pauses. "...sometimes."

"Mmhmm. You said that you met her brother?"

"Half brother."

"How is he, compared to her?"

"Uhm... normal, I guess. Definitely not as shy."

"Is he cute?"

"Mama!"

"What? It has to run in the family, right? That girl has some very nice genes."

That, Madoka can agree with. "...He's decent. But, Homura-chan doesn't really resemble him. I think she takes after her mom instead..."

"And, how is their relationship?"

"Bad, I think."

"Uh huh. Not surprising."

"It isn't?"

"No, not really." She hears her mother sigh. "Madoka, listen, okay, sometimes—there are reasons that people keep secrets—"

"I know that!"

"—and, maybe Homura doesn't like talking about her past, because it's something she doesn't want to remember."

"...I know that too, Mama."

"And, the further the two of you develop your relationship, maybe she'll tell you more, maybe she won't. That's for her to decide."

"I know..."

"Homura probably has a reason, why she acts the way she does. She walks with her head held high, but I'd say her footsteps are very tentative, like she's always unsure of the path ahead of her. I'm fairly certain she does like you, Madoka, but something's holding her back."

She frowns, eyes cast to the side as she thinks of Homura. "...Like what?"

"That, I have no idea. Like I said, I don't want to make any assumptions about her, but..."

"But what, Mama?"

"Mm, when people fall in love, they tend to be blinded, and they can only see the good things in a person. There's plenty of things you don't know about her—and things that maybe you don't want to know that you'll find out."

"Mama?"

"Homura's a good kid, Madoka. Like you, but quieter, and much, much angrier."

She blinks. "What...?"

"This is something you're going to need to find out on your own, Madoka. Listen, Mama doesn't mind talking with you more, but..."

She sighs, already knowing that she's not going to be getting anymore clear words from her mother. "No, it's fine, Mama, you can go check out Takkun's new girlfriend," she teases. "I'll contact you later to tell you if I might be able to squeeze in a trip before finals."

"Don't push yourself if you can't make it. And, don't forget to ask Homura along."

"Alright."

"And remember, you can call me, no matter what. Homura too, if she ever feels like it."

She smiles. "I know, Mama. I'll tell her."

"...I'll send you a picture later, of this mysterious Himawari."

Her smile warps into a grin. "Sure."

"Love you."

"Love you too, Mama."

Just as she's about to hang up, she hears shouting from the phone.

"Hello?"

"Love you, Madoka!"

"Love you too, Papa!"

"Hang up already, Papa, we need to go pick up Takkun!"

"If Mama hadn't hogged—"

The line clicks shut, and she shakes her head with a grin. She still gets homesick sometimes, especially after a good, long chat with her Mama. But, she glances around, Homura did help to lessen that longing somehow.

"Okay..." she breathes out.

Homework as she waits for Homura to return.

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She jolts awake, arms flaying, until she hears an audible smack.

"...Ow."

Still half asleep, she brushes away her messy bangs, eyes squinting at how dim the lighting is inside.

"...Homura-chan?" she blinks, staring at the figure standing a bit away, who is rubbing her jaw. "...Sorry, did I hit you?"

"No, it was my fault, I didn't mean to wake you," Homura murmurs softly.

She blinks once more, before she glances down. There's a blanket covering half her body, and her books have been pushed to the side.

"Math makes me sleepy too," Homura comments.

Her eyes widen; she had fallen asleep. "Ahh, what time is it?"

"Mm," Homura glances to the muted projection screen, "a little after six."

She sits back against the couch. "...So much for finishing my homework early."

"It's not too late," Homura says as she crosses the room. "I'm going to turn on the lights now, Madoka."

"Okay."

The flip is switched, and they both wince as light floods into the room.

Madoka stretches, before she yawns into her hand. "Did you just get back, Homura-chan?"

"Just a bit ago."

She quickly sits up, but remembers something, and slowly lowers back into the cushions.

"You weren't answering, so I got you your usual."

"Hm?" She turns around, and Homura holds out a familiar cup to her. "You dropped by the coffee shop?" she asks, accepting it.

"Mmhmm. Had to get my coffee fix, because someone wouldn't let me drink it this morning."

Madoka places her hot chocolate onto the coffee table with a frown.

"Don't worry, I already asked my doctor, and he said it was fine. You're not going to drink?"

"Oh, uhmmmm..." She pats down her messy hair. "...Actually, let me go wash up first."

Homura takes a seat at the couch, watching as she stands. "Okay."

When she returns, Homura is absently thumbing through her workbook, one hand holding her coffee in front of her. She glances up when she hears footsteps, and the smile thrown her way makes Madoka's chest pull.

"You should warm up your drink in the microwave," Homura says as she closes the book to set it aside. "It's probably lukewarm by now."

"Mm, that's fine," Madoka mumbles as she takes a seat. Homura hands her her drink, and she accepts it with a small thanks in murmur.

She takes a few sips, not at all bothered by the temperature.

Homura glances over. "How is it? It was a new worker today, so I wasn't sure if they made it too sweet or anything."

"Mm," she takes another drink, letting the cocoa wash over tongue as she evaluates their work, "...Three stars out of five."

"Ah. Too sweet?"

She smacks her lips, and then shakes her head. "Too much milk; there's not enough chocolate. Yours?"

"Two stars."

"Too sweet?"

Homura nods. "All I taste is chocolate."

"Switch?"

They trade cups, and move to take a respective drink.

Madoka blinks. She stares down at Homura's cup. "...Are you sure they didn't mix them?"

Homura shakes her head. "I'm not sure, but it's not like yours tastes like coffee."

"Well, hopefully this barista will get things right, soon." She takes another sip of Homura's drink.

"...I assume that's yours now?"

Madoka smiles. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

"Mmhmm..."

She fidgets with her cup as Homura settles against the couch. "Uhm, h-how was it?"

Homura glances over, before closing her eyes. "It was just a normal check up. Blood work, and then an electrocardiogram. Everything seems to be fine. They're switching to a different medication with a lower dose to see if it'll help with the nausea."

She nods. "T-That's good."

Homura hums in agreement as Madoka continues to sit there in silence, occasionally sipping at her drink.

Eventually, Homura sits back up, eyes opening as she raises her eyebrow. "That's... it?"

"Hm?"

"I was... expecting a different reaction."

Madoka blinks. "What do you mean?"

"You're acting... really calm."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"Is that weird?"

"Very."

Madoka takes another sip, using it to swallow her anxiousness, because truthfully, she wants to ask so many questions. There's a hand on her arm, and she glances back up, surprised, and then touched, to see that Homura looks almost worried.

"Did something happen?" Homura asks softly.

She averts her eyes. "...I'm sorry."

"For what?"

She fidgets with her cup. "...For blowing this out of proportion. F-For making you feel guilty, even though I know that... that it's really none of my business to know about your heart transplant..." She blinks rapidly, frustrated that tears are gathering in her eyes even though there's no reason she should be crying.

"...Mm... If I had to guess, you spoke with your mom?"

She raises her head in surprise. "...Maybe. H-How—"

Homura's lips tug into a small smile. "Because the only person I know that can actually calm you down is your mom."

Madoka sighs. "I know. A-And I'm really sorry, for acting so stupid, and irrational and—"

"It's fine."

She glances at Homura.

"It's," Homura rubs the surface of her cup with her thumb, before giving her another small smile, "...I think at this point, I'd be more worried if you didn't react like that. Seeing you calm is kind of scary, actually."

Madoka reaches over to smack her arm. "And what does that mean?"

"Ow," Homura says, even though her smile remains. "It's... You're, uhm... I think it's good, you're honest with your feelings. It... makes you genuine, or uhm..." She lowers her eyes, the cup slowly twisting in her hand as she fidgets.

Madoka smiles with how Homura seems to be stumbling with her words. "Are you sure?" she asks, trying to lighten the mood. "It won't scare you away?"

Homura shakes her head. "No. I like that about you, actually. Uhm...I-I mean, not that I like you worrying about me, but uhm..."

She grins at the sight of Homura blushing. "It's okay, I think I kind of understand what you're saying, Homura-chan. But, uhm, if you really don't mind..."

"I don't. It's strange, really. If it was anyone else, I'd definitely be annoyed."

"R-Really?"

"Uh huh." Homura takes a sip of her drink, and frowns when she remembers it's supposed to be hot chocolate even though it doesn't taste like it.

Madoka swallows nervously. Did that mean what she thought it meant? "Homura-chan, I—"

They both jump when they hear a beep in the background.

She bites back a frustrated groan, before moving her head, trying to locate the sound.

"I don't see it," Homura comments as she looks around.

"Uhm..." she frowns, trying to remember where she had last seen her phone. She puts her drink down onto the coffee table. "After I talked with Mama, I placed it down, here," she pats the cushion that Homura is sitting on.

Homura stands, and Madoka proceeds to search in between the cushions.

"I think..." she feels something solid in her hand, and quickly reaches for it. "Okay, I think I have it." She tugs on the device, and pulls it out. She flips it over as she sits back down.

Homura retakes her seat, watching as Madoka unlocks her phone to check her messages.

She's grinning a second later. "Oh."

Curious, Homura leans over. "What is it?"

Madoka tilts her phone, giving Homura a clearer view of the screen. "So, apparently Takkun has a girlfriend now."

Homura raises an eyebrow. "Isn't he kind of too young to have a girlfriend?"

"He's almost nine."

"...Which is still fairly young."

Madoka shrugs. "Those were Mama's words, not mine."

Homura nods toward the screen. "This is her?"

"Uh huh. Her name is Himawari."

"...She doesn't look like a Himawari."

Madoka grins. "You don't know anything about her, Homura-chan. She looks like a very sweet girl."

"She does...?"

"Uh huh. Why, what does she look like to you?"

"In one word... trouble."

Madoka frowns. "How so?"

"Look at how wide she's grinning."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"People who smile like that are trouble."

"Homura-chan."

Homura merely takes a sip of her drink.

"Well, I think she seems nice."

"Look at your brother's face, Madoka."

Madoka blinks before she zooms in on the picture. "..."

"Tell me again that she seems nice."

"Mm... maybe I should go home earlier than planned..."

The phone chimes once more, prompting her to swipe the screen. Homura takes another sip, watching as Madoka's eyebrows shoot up as she reads the message.

"I am so going to kick this girl's butt when I get home," she growls.

Homura leans over to quickly skim whatever has Madoka riled up. "...Told you."

"I can't believe I thought she looked sweet! Maybe I should go home for Takkun's birthday after all..."

"When is it?"

"The weekend before finals..."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I know! But!" She quickly stands to her feet. "I can't just ignore this, Homura-chan! Why would anyone pick on Takkun? He's such a sweet kid!"

"That's probably why, Madoka. Bullies tend to go after those weaker than them."

"Grr." She crosses her arms across her chest, before she starts pacing around. "Seriously, she's super lucky that I'm in Tokyo! Otherwise I'd definitely go over there and kick her butt!"

"I have no doubts that you'd be able to accomplish that, Madoka, as she's 10 years younger than you," Homura says dryly as she watches her move across the room, "but, I'm pretty sure there are some laws against that."

Madoka whirls around to glare at her.

"Plus, I'm sure your mother will take care of it."

"That's true... but, poor Takkun." She frowns. "...Guess he really does take after me."

"He should be okay. He seems like a well adjusted kid with strong support from your parents."

"...I should be there too, Homura-chan. If Takkun's like how I was when I was his age..." She shakes her head. "Plus, he doesn't have a Sayaka-chan to watch over him, not like I did..."

"That's a good idea, actually."

Madoka blinks. "What?"

"Miki Sayaka is there. Have her kick the girl's butt in your place for the time being, and then you can tag in when you go home after finals."

She sighs, before dropping back onto the couch. "That's... No, it's different, Homura-chan. It's, different, being the older child. There's—you're supposed to be there, for your siblings."

Homura quietly takes another sip.

"...I'm sure your brother feels the same way, Homura-chan."

"Don't lump that idiot with you, Madoka. He already lost his 'big brother' title a long time ago. Did Takkun specifically ask you to come home?"

She frowns. "Well, no. He... didn't want me there for his birthday, actually."

Homura nods. "There you go."

"But—"

"It's different, being the younger sibling, too. Sometimes you don't want the older one there, because they'll make things worse. Or in my case, I never wanted him there in the first place."

"Homura-chan."

"I understand how you feel, Madoka, but what do you hope to accomplish by going back home? Will you really be able to kick this girl's butt like you say you will?"

"Well..."

"You always mention how difficult your math class is; will you be able to pass if you miss that weekend of studying?"

She bites her lip. "...I can always study on the train there, and study at home."

Homura merely raises an eyebrow. "Do you really think that will happen?"

"Argh."

The phone chimes once more, and Madoka quickly turns to it.

"...Mama tells me not to worry and that she'll handle it."

Homura tips her cup towards her.

"...I'm going to call him later, to talk with him."

"That sounds like a good idea," Homura says as she stands. "Uhm, I'm going to change, and then probably heat up something for dinner."

"Okay, Homura-chan," Madoka mumbles as she continues to stare at her phone.

Homura tilts her head at her, before she turns to walk to their shared room.

/

"—but why didn't you tell me, Takkun!"

Homura enters the living room, now dressed in her sweats and sporting her thick glasses.

"Well, no, but—"

She passes the pacing Madoka, limping slightly as she moves to the kitchen to heat up the leftovers. When she opens the refrigerator door, she frowns at the box of pizza.

"...Okay. I'll talk to you when I come home. Are you sure you don't—Okay, *okay.* I'll see you after my finals then... Uh huh. Love you too, Takkun."

Leftovers in hand, Homura straightens out. She shuts the door and turns to the counter, only to see Madoka enter the kitchen with a dejected look on her face.

"...Is everything alright?" she asks as she places the containers down.

"Mm..." Madoka joins her side to help. "Takkun says he's fine, and that I should just come back after my finals."

"Right."

"...And that he didn't tell me, because he didn't want me to worry."

Homura nods. "See? What did I tell you?"

Madoka frowns as her hands stop moving. "..."

Homura doesn't notice as she opens the pizza box. "How many slices did you want, Madoka? ...Madoka?" She blinks, and turns to see Madoka staring at the counter. "Madoka?"

"Uhm... s-sorry, what did you ask me, Homura-chan?"

Homura stares at her for a moment. "...You're really upset about this."

She sees Madoka's brow furrow. "Of course I would be, Homura-chan." She sighs. "My little brother is being bullied, and I can't do anything to help him because I'm all the way here, in Tokyo. He knows that I'm busy, and he didn't want to tell me because—" she wipes at her eyes, "because he's more worried about my grades, than about himself!"

Homura glances around, before slowly reaching out her hands until they're on Madoka's shoulders. "H-Hey, uhm... I-I'm sure your brother is doing fine."

Madoka sniffles loudly. "I'm a horrible sister."

Homura immediately grasps for the tissue box nearby. She holds it out, and Madoka takes a few to dab at her eyes.

"I'm sure Takkun doesn't think that, Madoka," Homura says softly.

"Well, he *should*."

"I-I mean, uhm... i-if he's anything like you, he's probably okay...? Uhm, it'll make him stronger in the long run?"

Madoka lowers her hands to shoot Homura a glare.

"I—y-your mom will probably talk to her mom, and have her stop...?"

Madoka sighs. "Which means she'll probably pick on him even more now that she got in trouble."

"If it's any consolation, he'll be on summer vacation soon, so he won't have to deal with her?"

Madoka reaches over and smacks her on the arm. "Homura-chan, you're not helping here!"

"S-Sorry," she mumbles. "If he punches her back, she'll probably stop?"

"Homura-chan."

"W-What? That's what worked for me...?"

Madoka sighs, before she lifts her head as Homura's words finally register. "...You were bullied too, Homura-chan?"

Homura shrugs. "It was a long time ago."

Madoka stares at her, picturing a younger, smaller Homura, who, considering her family situation, most likely had no one to run to for help. She leans forward, slipping her arms around Homura's waist to hold her close.

"I'm sorry, Homura-chan. You didn't deserve that. Neither does Takkun. No one does."

Homura slowly relaxes. "Uhm... It was a long time ago, Madoka. I'm okay now. Uhm, but thanks..." She awkwardly pats Madoka on the back.

Madoka smiles to herself, taking comfort in Homura's warmth. She knows that their hug is lasting too long though, and reluctantly pulls away.

"Madoka."

"Hm?"

Homura glances to the floor, before her eyes once more meet rose pink. "...The fact that you're this worried about Takkun, I'm sure that's enough, for him. He knows that he has you, and your parents supporting him. That you'd drop everything, and even fail your classes for him. It's—probably why he didn't want to tell you—because he knows that you'd immediately go there to try and help... He's lucky, to have an older sister like you."

Madoka stares into lavender, knowing that Homura is speaking from experience. "...I'm sure your brother thinks the same, Homura-chan."

Homura immediately draws back with a frown. "Like I said, don't lump yourself with that idiot, Madoka." She turns back to the leftovers. "How many slices did you want?"

Knowing she has touched a nerve, Madoka lets the conversation drop. "Just one is fine."

"...I really don't want to be eating this tomorrow as well."

"Let's just freeze the rest."

Homura nods. "We'll have Miki Sayaka eat them when she comes back next week. I guess her visiting is good for something."

Madoka sighs. "I still don't see why you and Sayaka-chan can't get along, Homura-chan."

"Really? It makes perfect sense to me."

Madoka raises her eyebrow. "Okay, please enlighten me then, oh wise one?"

Homura moves to the oven with the box of pizza in hand. "It's simple, really," she says as tugs open the oven door.

Madoka starts pulling out a few bowls to reheat the curry with. "Uh huh."

"She's an idiot."

"Homura-chan."

"That's it, Madoka. That's my only reason."

Madoka rolls her eyes even as her lips tug into a fond smile. Her smile suddenly widens into a grin. "Actually, Sayaka-chan was saying that maybe she'll transfer to Tokyo."

There's a metal clang, and Madoka turns to see Homura staring at her. "...She's kidding, right?"

Madoka moves overs to the drawers to grab a spoon. "Maybe."

"Madoka."

Madoka hums, smiling in amusement at the small lilt in Homura's voice, making it sound almost like a whine.

"...I'll go to Mitakihara for you."

Madoka glances behind her. "What?"

"...In exchange for kicking that Himawari girl's butt, do you think your mom will let me stay at her house after I transfer to Mitakihara College?"

She places a hand on her hip. "Homura-chan."

"I'll pay rent, of course. And—"

"Homura-chan."

Homura sighs. "...It's a hypothetical question, Madoka."

"Uh huh."

/

Towel draped over her shoulders and hands holding her folded clothes, Homura steps out of the bathroom, body still warm from the shower.

"...Okay, talk you later Sayaka-chan. Okay, good night." Madoka lowers her phone to her bed as the line disconnects.

"Miki Sayaka is home?" Homura asks as she heads towards the closet.

"Mmhmm. She was back a while ago, but her parents took her out to dinner. They just got home."

Homura nods as she slips her clothes into their respective places.

"How are you feeling, Homura-chan?"

"Mm." She turns around, and Madoka pats the spot next to her. She crosses the room, and Madoka eyes her, noticing the slight limp. She takes a seat a moment later. "Okay. Better. The lowered dosage seems to help."

Madoka nods, obviously looking relieved. "That's good. How's your foot?"

"It's fine." Homura glances over, her hands fidgeting with the ends of her pajama shirt. "Uhm, thank you, Madoka."

She blinks. "For what?"

"Uhm, well, I guess I was due for a readjustment for my medicine for a while now. If you hadn't forced me to call my doctor, I probably would've just continued on like normal." She tugs on her shirt. "...I really do feel a lot better, so, uhm, thank you..."

Madoka smiles and places her hand on Homura's arm. "You're welcome, Homura-chan. I'm glad you feel better, too. I'm surprised your doctor didn't readjust your dosage though?"

Homura shakes her head. "Well, since I really didn't say anything, they assumed that I was adjusting well with that medication..."

"Homura-chan."

"And—the side effects really weren't that bad compared to the medication before that..."

Madoka frowns as she presses her fingers into Homura's arm.

"But," Homura glances up, "this one right now seems even better..."

Her hand slowly relaxes. "When's your next appointment?"

"Next week. They want to make sure the new medication is working. Though, I'm supposed to call them if there's any complications."

Madoka nods. "...Homura-chan?"

"Yes?"

"...Would it be alright if I went with you?"

Homura blinks in surprise. "...What?"

Madoka moves her hand until it's placed on top of Homura's. She intertwines their fingers, before she looks back up to give Homura a smile.

"You know, I keep thinking about Takkun, being all alone... but, you're right, when you say that he's not, because Mama and Papa are there for him, and, I told Sayaka-chan about it too, so she'll keep an eye out whenever possible."

Homura glances at their hands. "Okay...? But what does that—"

"And then," Madoka continues as she holds Homura's hand tightly, "I keep thinking about you, Homura-chan, having to go through all this by yourself. I—want to be there for you too, Homura-chan. It's... I can't do anything for Takkun, because he's there, and I'm here. Of course I'm going to continue to support him, and I'll call him and remind him that I'm there for him. I can't do anything but that for him... but, you're here, Homura-chan. And I'm here, too. I—can be here for you, Homura-chan, if you'll let me."

Homura stares at her for a moment, before she averts her eyes. Madoka's afraid she has said too much, except she can clearly see the pink now dashed across Homura's pale face.

Homura swallows heavily and barely resists the urge to pull away. "Uhm... t-that is..."

"Homura-chan?"

They both jump when they hear loud beeping echo in the room.

Madoka blinks, and turns to her phone: none of the lights are flashing.

Homura pulls away when she finally realizes that it's her phone. Madoka watches as Homura heads over to the dresser, reaching for the phone once she's close enough.

It drops back into silence as soon as she picks it up, but starts beeping once more before she can check the voice mail.

"Hello? ...Keiichi-san? ...Okay, but what do you want me to do about that? ...Okay, but it wasn't fatal, right? ...well, how much blood did you see?"

Madoka feels her eyebrows shoot up. She quickly stands to rush to her side.

Homura glances over when she sees Madoka approach. "...He was still conscious though?"

Madoka gestures, and Homura shakes her head.

"Just tell me which hospital, and I'll visit him tomorrow. What? ...You said it wasn't fatal."

Madoka winces when she hears the other person on the line shout.

"...Fine. ...What? Why do you want my address? ...No, I don't plan on walking. There's something called a taxi, you know."

More shouting, and Madoka stares at Homura in worry when she rattles off their address.

"*Yes*, it's real. *Yes*, I'll be ready when you drop by. I need to get changed now, so I'll see you later." Homura pulls the phone away, and they can both hear more shouting that is quickly cut off when Homura angrily jabs at the phone to hang up.

"Homura-chan? W-What happened?"

Homura blinks, before she turns to face Madoka. "...Okay, so, apparently Satoshi got stabbed somehow trying to thwart a robbery or something."

Madoka's mouth drops open in surprise. "W-Wha**t?"**

AN: Ooh, just a bit over a month on the update; I've been... well, not exactly busy, but not exactly not busy.

As always, thanks for reading and reviewing!

Early June, and she can still feel the lingering traces of spring in the air. Homura tells her that summers in Tokyo are humid, and though she doesn't doubt her, she tugs her sweater closer; it's the middle of the night, and whatever heat from the sun has already dissipated.

There's a buzz of silence in her ears, occasionally broken up by scattered rustles of night life. After another glance down the empty streets, and another re-evaluation of the shadows zigzagging across their surroundings, she finally turns to Homura. Homura, who's absently gazing at nothing. Her face is passive, almost expressionless.

Not the usual Homura she knows.

Tentatively, Madoka reaches out to take her hand. Homura immediately flinches at the touch, before she seems to rouse herself out of her trance.

"Homura-chan...?"

Lavender focuses on her, though those eyes are still absent behind the wide frames of her glasses. "Hm...?"

Madoka tries again, and there's a small bit of relief when Homura doesn't pull away.

She intertwines their fingers together, and squeezes Homura's hand lightly in reassurance.

More relief when Homura gives her a small smile.

They both turn when they hear the sounds of an approaching vehicle; there's a crackle of tires on asphalt, before beams of light can be seen around the corner.

Madoka glances to Homura, and she can see how tense she is, almost like she's deciding whether or not to run away. She wonders if this is what her mother was referring to.

She sets her jaw, and waits as the car pulls up right in front of their apartment.

Homura stares at it, unmoving, and a full minute passes before they hear the door open.

Madoka watches as the driver steps out: a gruff looking older man, unshaven, and dressed in clothes that have seen better days. Taller than the both of them.

Madoka unconsciously moves closer to Homura as he sets his gaze their way.

"...Who's this?" His low voice breaks the silence.

"...A friend."

He scratches his chin. "An ex of Satoshi's?"

Madoka's brow furrows, but Homura answers for her by glaring.

He coughs into his hand. "...She coming along?"

Homura glances to Madoka, before she lowers her eyes.

Madoka already knows that Homura won't ask her; she's already anticipating the long night as she waits for Homura to come home.

"...If she wants to."

Her eyes widen, and she turns to Homura who's still staring at the floor, deliberately avoiding her gaze.

"Alright. Uh, you can just push whatever's in back to the side."

Homura rolls her eyes. "Figures you're still treating your car like your house. Madoka?"

She turns to Homura.

"Uhm, are you going with us...?"

She quickly nods. "Yes! O-Of course. I-If that's okay..."

Homura once again avoids her eyes. "...You can sit in the front. I have a feeling that..." She glances through the car windows, "..."

"It's not that bad. I cleaned it a few months back." He moves to step into the car. "Oh." He turns around, and holds out one hand to Madoka as his eyes gloss over Homura and Madoka's still intertwined ones. "Suzuki Keiichi."

"Ah..." Madoka blinks. She's about to accept his hand when she realizes that she's still holding Homura's. She momentarily panics, not willing to let go, but Keiichi merely switches hands, offering his left one out to her instead.

He's smiling, and it seems to soften his appearance somewhat.

"I'm—Kaname Madoka," she tells him as she takes his hand. It's a strong handshake, and she can feel the callouses resting along his palm.

"Nice to meet you," he says as he lets go. "Homura has never mentioned you."

"Ah—"

Homura pushes past them to reach for the backseat door. "There was no need to." With narrowed eyes, she opens the door to evaluate the interior.

"It's better than last time," Keiichi says to her back. "Just get in already; stop dawdling."

He's already entering the car, and misses the glare Homura shoots his way.

Madoka gently tugs her hand. "Homura-chan? It's fine, I can sit in the back. I'm sure..." she glances to the driver's seat, "...you have things, to uhm, catch up on...?"

Homura sighs. "...Let me at least make sure there's nothing rotting in here."

Madoka gives a nervous glance to the messy pile inside.

/

It's not that the seats are uncomfortable, in fact, it's just the exact opposite: soft, cushiony, and easily conforming to her body. Despite the alarmingly amount of trash in the seat next to her, it's comfortable.

Comfortable enough that she can feel a yawn bubbling in the back of her throat. She tries to stifle it, but fails, and instead ends up blocking her open mouth with her hand. Tears have formed at the edges of her eyes, and she wipes them away with her sleeve.

She lowers her hands back into her lap, and continues to stare outside the window. Empty streets, and darkness that's occasionally interrupted by lights.

Even though the window is slightly open, she finds that it's—stifling in here. She tugs on her sleeves, before patting down her sweater.

Silence, and more silence.

Homura sits right in front of her, and she can just imagine the frown etched on her face; the same frown that had appeared as she had entered the car.

She had been expecting at least civil conversation during their ride to the hospital, but it's turning into fifteen minutes of strained silence.

She awkwardly pats down her sweater once more.

\\

The car reaches the driveway, slowing to take the turn with a lowered speed.

Madoka stares up at the lit building, knowing that this is where Homura goes to every time she has an appointment. A look to her side, and she can barely see Homura's face in the side mirror, illuminated by the lights that line the entrance of the hospital.

She's still frowning.

They find an empty spot nearby, and once the car is parked, all three doors open.

Once outside, she nervously readjusts her sweater. One more timid glance around, before she moves over, until she's right beside Homura and close enough to hold her hand.

Homura starts at the touch, once again flinching away as she whirls on Madoka with wide eyes.

This time, Madoka can see there's fear residing in lavender. Her lips part, but her words remain stuck in her throat.

"Homura."

They both turn, only to find Keiichi now standing on the sidewalk that leads to the hospital. He tilts his head towards the building, and starts walking away.

Homura scowls, before her shoulders droop, and Madoka can hear the quiet exhale of her breath. She blinks when a cold hand reaches for her own. Without a second thought, Madoka intertwines their fingers as she matches Homura's gaze.

"It'll be okay, Homura-chan," she whispers softly, her voice finally breaking the stillness around them.

Homura nods, and they start walking, hand in hand.

/

It's empty and quiet.

The normal sounds she has associated with her hospital visits are gone, and instead of the front entrance, they go around the side to where the emergency room resides. There's a security guard posted at the doors, and he eyes them as they move to greet the receptionist.

After explaining who they're looking for, they're handed visitor name tags and informed that Satoshi is currently in surgery. They're given directions to the designated waiting room. They stick their tags to their clothes, and then head further inside after they're buzzed in through the doors.

Keiichi walks ahead, and gentle footsteps follow him as Homura and Madoka trail behind. Through an empty hallway, and he suddenly stops and turns around.

"Homura—"

She recognizes that tone; recognizes that look on his face.

She continues moving, walking past him as she tugs Madoka along.

Madoka shoots Keiichi a nervous glance over her shoulder, but he merely sighs and moves to follow after.

Two turns, and two more long hallways, before it's a brief travel up the elevator until they reach their destination: a small room marked with a placard.

Madoka already knows, and doesn't want to think why Homura has this place memorized.

The door is open, and Homura moves to enter first. Madoka bumps into her when Homura suddenly stops, seemingly frozen in place.

"Homura?" Keiichi is behind them, and he quietly calls out to her.

"*You*."

Madoka's eyes widen at the venom she can hear in that voice.

Homura takes a step back, pushing against Madoka who is still behind her.

"Homura-chan—"

"*You, dare come in here, when this is all your fault?!*"

The voice is sharp and shrill, and seems to bounce and echo off the walls.

Madoka tumbles back, tripping over her feet as Homura back pedals into her.

More yelling, and there's an angry nurse appearing around the corner.

Madoka ignores her, her own hands reaching for Homura who looks absolutely terrified as an older woman, face livid, emerges from the waiting room.

"Homura—"

There's a loud crack, and then the clatter of plastic on tile floor. Madoka stares, eyes wide at the outstretched hand—at Homura who's now holding her face.

"Get out of here! GET OUT!"

"Please, you need to quiet down! There are patients sleeping!"

The nurse is ignored, and Homura is angrily shoved back. "GET OUT! IF SATOSHI DIES, IT'S BECAUSE OF YOU!"

Homura trips over Madoka, and they're both losing their balance before strong hands grab them both, steadying them to their feet.

"Homura—" Keiichi glares at the woman, who merely narrows her eyes at him.

"None of you are welcomed here," she hisses.

Homura pushes Keiichi away, and before Madoka can react, Homura is gone.

The nurse holds out her hands. "Please, if you don't quiet down, I will have you escorted out."

"...She has a right to be here." Keiichi's voice is low; almost dangerously so.

The woman scoffs, and turns back around to enter the waiting room. "That *thing* is not welcomed here. Leave, before I make you regret for not listening to me."

Madoka pulls herself from her shock and ignores whatever Keiichi says in response. She quickly grabs Homura's glasses from the floor, and then takes off running in the direction that Homura had gone.

\\

She searches the quiet hospital wings, hurrying through hallways that she knows she shouldn't be in. The half-lit setting makes everything look the same, and for a while she's not even sure what floor she's on.

Something scratches at her throat, and there's panic building because she can't seem to find Homura. Her sweaty hands still holds her glasses, and at each empty hallway, she has to wipe her hands to keep them from slipping out of her grip.

She understands now why Homura never talks about home—why Homura never talks about family.

Her vision blurs, and she angrily wipes the tears away.

She has no reason to cry, but that thought only makes the tears spill out even more.

/

It's an off-chance, that she ducks into one of the prayers rooms nearby. She's crying too hard, and the closest bathroom is too far away.

Even with her blurred vision, she somehow spots the labelled door, and immediately steps in.

To her dismay, there's someone already there, but as she turns to leave, she recognizes black, and the small hint of lavender peeking through.

She stares, one hand still gripping the handle as the door remains opened.

Homura quickly turns away.

It's a small room, but Homura somehow seems even smaller today.

Madoka steps forward, and the door automatically swings closed, the action punctuated with a small click.

She stands there, her tears already forgotten, because the person she's looking for is here.

Slowly, she steps closer; she's afraid that Homura will run.

She doesn't.

The bench creaks as she lowers her body and takes a seat. Her hand still holds Homura's glasses, and they sit in her lap as she tries to rack up the courage to break the silence.

"...Sorry."

Her eyes widen and she immediately turns to Homura, who is merely staring ahead. She has a clear view of her profile, and she's surprised—or maybe she isn't, that Homura's face is blank.

"Wh—" Madoka clears her throat, before she angrily swipes at her eyes. "W-Why are you apologizing, Homura-chan?"

The bench moves as Homura shrugs, even as she remains facing forward. "I... was hoping she wouldn't be here yet," she murmurs softly. "I..." Her brow furrows and she shakes her head. "Sorry... you had to see that..."

She inhales through her nose, trying to keep that ball of anger inside her from escaping. "Homura-chan."

Homura flinches, and Madoka immediately reaches for her, wrapping her arms around her even as Homura tries to pull away. She's tense, and Madoka merely holds her closer.

Finally, Homura slowly relaxes, and her own arms loop around Madoka's body.

"I'm sorry," Homura whispers.

Madoka shakes her head. She's too angry to say anything, and buries her face against Homura's neck.

They remain that way, until Madoka moves, and she finally registers the feel of something in her hands.

"...Oh."

Homura gently pulls back to look at her, and Madoka holds out her glasses.

"Oh... thanks. I was, kind of..." She takes them, and slips them on. "Much better..."

Madoka leans over, until her head rests against Homura's.

"I wasn't... sure it was you, at the door," Homura murmurs.

Madoka shifts, until she can see Homura out of the corner of her eye.

Homura offers her a small smile, and points to her glasses. "Couldn't... see."

Madoka nods, still refusing to pull away. "I..." She swallows, quickly cycling through her mind to try and find something to clear the air somehow.

Before she can say anything, Homura speaks once more. "I... used to come here, a lot." Her voice is quiet, and Madoka lifts her head this time to watch her. "When I was... in the hospital, when I was younger..."

Homura gestures to the stained glass windows.

"I always thought it was more colourful in here, than anywhere else..."

"Homura—"

The door is pulled open, and they both turn to face the entrance.

Keiichi has his foot propping up the door. "...I'm glad to see some habits haven't changed."

Madoka barely bites back her sigh at the interruption.

Homura moves away, and Madoka feels the lost of warmth as she watches Homura stand.

"Are you ready to leave now?" Homura asks as she turns to face him.

"...You should be here."

Homura merely stares. A full minute passes, before Keiichi's face drops, and he runs a hand through his hair.

"Yeah, I'll... take you girls home. I'll come back, after, to see how Satoshi is doing."

Homura silently offers Madoka a hand.

She takes it, and remains holding on even after Homura helps pull her to her feet.

\\

Homura drops heavily onto the couch; a rare act, as she's usually more prim and proper. Madoka understands, and after she makes sure the door is locked, she joins her.

She glances to Homura, who is staring at the floor. "...Are you okay, Homura-chan?"

Homura closes her eyes. "I'm... fine."

She knows she's lying, and snakes her hand around hers once more. "Homura-chan... it's..."

She still can't seem to find the right words.

"I'm going to go get changed."

Homura stands, their fingers untangling as she moves to walk to their room.

Madoka leans back against the couch, tilting her head up to stare at the ceiling. She sighs.

/

When Madoka emerges from the bathroom dressed in her pajamas, the familiar futon is already rolled out onto the floor. Homura is standing by the dresser, phone held out in front of her as she checks over her messages.

She notices Madoka's entrance, and looks her way. "...No update on Satoshi's condition. But, no news is good news."

Madoka nods. "T-That's good..."

She moves over to deposit her clothes into the closet, and as Homura walks past her to head to her futon, something catches her eye.

"Homura-chan?"

"Hm?"

Madoka reaches out, frowning. Her hand is under Homura's chin, and she tilts her face to the side. "Your face..."

Homura blinks. "What? Is there something there?" She moves her hand and tries to wipe whatever it is off.

Madoka shakes her head. "There's—" she breathes in sharply, "...a cut, across your cheek."

"Oh." Homura finally feels the raised line on her face. "Mm, it was... probably from her ring. It'll heal."

She drops her hand, and is about to walk away except Madoka is still holding her chin.

"Uhm, Madoka...?"

"...Why—do you know that? Has this happened before?" Her face is calm, but her voice is lower than usual.

Homura briefly glances away. "No—at least, not in a while."

Madoka grabs her by the shoulders. "What? She hits you?"

Homura stares at her. "It's—nothing. I'm fine. We should get some slee—"

Madoka refuses to let go. "Homura-chan!"

"She caught me off guard this time. I'm fine."

Madoka presses her fingers into Homura's shoulder, but she immediately lets go when she sees Homura wince. "I'm sorry." Her hands trail down, until they're now resting on Homura's arms. "Homura-chan..."

To her surprise, Homura merely gives her a small smile. She moves her hands, until they're now on top of Madoka's.

"Thank you for worrying about me, but—whatever happened back then doesn't matter any more."

Madoka searches her eyes, but all she sees is that red line running across her pale skin. "How can you—"

Homura tilts her head. "Technically, what she said was true."

Madoka blinks. "What—"

Homura sighs softly. "It's—my fault that Satoshi was hurt. It's... it'll be my fault if he dies."

Madoka grips her hands tightly. "That—makes no sense whatsoever! You weren't the one who stabbed him! You were here, with me when that happened! How is it your fault!?"

"...Because I was born?"

Madoka lowers her head as she grits her teeth. "Homura-chan—you—" she chokes back her words, tears forming in her eyes once more. She's shaking, and it's taking all of her will-power to not reach out and— "YOU—don't know how angry that makes me, to hear you say that."

She raises her head, and Homura takes a step back when Madoka's face seems to reflect those words.

"Mado—"

"I'll, kick that Himawari's butt, when I go back home," Madoka hisses. "And—I'll kick *yours*, if I ever hear you say that again." Her eyes narrow, and she takes a step forward. "And—I'll kick that woman's butt, for making you feel that way."

She's still holding Homura's hands, and that's all that's really keeping Homura from running.

"Mado—"

"You—" Madoka lets go, only to place her hands on the side of Homura's face. "It's not your fault, Homura-chan."

Homura tries to jerk away, but Madoka holds on tightly.

"Homura-chan—"

"...But, what if he doesn't make it...? I—"

Madoka hugs her tightly. "You said so yourself, that he reminds you a lot of Sayaka-chan. If he's like her, then that means he's stubborn; that he's a fighter. I can't—" she hugs Homura closer, "I can't promise you that he'll be fine, but—I do know that *it's not your fault*."

Homura presses her hands into Madoka's back, returning the hug. "I... prayed for him, at the hospital," she whispers. "I..."

Madoka rubs Homura's back. "They'll hear you, Homura-chan. Let's get some sleep, okay?"

"...Okay."

Madoka pulls away, yet her hands still lightly rest on Homura's waist. "Homura-chan, it's... would it be alright if... you slept with me today...?"

Homura blinks.

Madoka blushes, knowing how bad that sounded. "I-I mean, uhm, n-not—but s-share a bed, with me, I mean, uhm—"

Homura leans forward, until her head gently taps Madoka's forehead. It stops her babbling, and instead only serves to make her face even warmer.

"Thank you. I... wouldn't mind... " She steps away. "...It's—getting late; even if Keiichi-san contacts us about Satoshi, we can't really do anything about it. You have an early class tomorrow. We should sleep."

Madoka nods, trying to keep her blush under control. "Y-Yeah..."

/

She's getting used to sharing a blanket with Homura, and the warmth she can feel radiating off from her warms her own heart.

Sleep though, is another story.

After what had happened in the past few hours, she's definitely too wound up to sleep.

"...Homura-chan?"

She hears the rustle of blankets, and the sounds and movements tell her that Homura is turning over.

"Hm...?"

Her voice sounds slightly hoarse, and Madoka immediately feels bad for waking her. "Sorry, were you sleeping?"

Homura clears her throat. "It's fine. What's wrong...?"

Madoka can hear her, but she hates that she can't really see her. She scoots closer, using the warmth as guidance.

"I... can't sleep..."

Homura remains quiet, long enough that she wonders if she's still awake.

But—

"I'm sorry."

She reaches out tentatively, hands searching for Homura's in the dark. She misses, and there's something soft and furry felt on her fingertips.

She frowns, before she realizes what it is. "...Tora-kun?"

"Uhm, did you want to hold him...?"

"No... I was, looking for your hand," she murmurs.

"Oh. Uhm..."

Madoka smiles when she feels Homura's hand brush against hers. They fumble for a bit, until their fingers are once again intertwined.

"Homura-chan... earlier, why were you apologizing?"

"...For asking you to come to the hospital with me. You have class tomorrow, but—I was—"

They're close enough that she has a rough estimation of where Homura is, and she angrily tugs her closer.

They both hiss in pain when Homura's forehead collides with hers.

"Ow..."

"...Madoka—"

"Okay, that—was a bad idea."

"...I'll turn on the lights—"

She's more gentle this time, and after a few more tentative pats, she has her arms around Homura as she holds her close.

"Homura-chan, why would you apologize for that? I—wanted to be there for you. I... want to be here for you."

Homura sighs softly, and Madoka can feel her breath against her neck. "It's... stupid."

"...What is?"

"...Everything."

"Anything involving you isn't stupid..."

She can feel Homura lean into her. "...I knew she'd be there," she whispers. "I—didn't want to go—but... Keiichi-san... I thought that, if..." Her voice trails off, and Madoka strokes her head.

"It's okay," she murmurs. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Homura takes in a shaky breath. "...She, never liked me. Earlier... when you asked if she had hit me before..."

Madoka immediately tenses.

"...Yes, but it was—rare. She couldn't, really. I was..." Homura breathes out with a small laugh, "I was in the hospital too much, for her to do anything to me."

Madoka hugs her closer. "Homura-chan..."

"Satoshi—we didn't really get along either, when we were younger. He's—trying, really hard to make up for it... too hard, maybe," she mutters. "I'm..." she presses her face against Madoka, "...I'm the reason why he's... in the hospital."

"Homura—"

"I'm—not the one that stabbed him, I know that. But, I'm the reason why he's... working there."

"At Tetsuno...?"

"Yes." She sighs once more. "It's... a long story..."

Madoka gently threads her fingers through Homura's hair. "...You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, Homura-chan."

"...C-Can I tell you this later?"

"You can tell me whenever you want to."

"Thank you..."

She briefly thinks about it, before she turns her head, and presses her lips against the top of Homura's head. Though her face burns, she tries her best to ignore it.

"Let's try to get some sleep, Homura-chan."

She can feel how tense Homura is in her arms, and is afraid that she'll pull away. To her surprise, Homura hugs her tighter.

"T...hank you," she whispers very softly.

She's glad that they had left the lights off. "Goodnight, Homura-chan."

"...Goodnight, Madoka."

\\

She groans, burying her face deeper in her pillow when she hears her alarm. Her pillow though, is fluffier than she remembers, and maybe not as soft as it should be in certain places.

With her brow furrowed, she pulls away, eyes cracking open in slight confusion.

Black, and purple, with a small bit of orange poking out.

Her eyes widen, and she recognizes her pillow to be Homura, with Tora somehow squished in between them.

Homura, who is awake, and is staring at her with squinted eyes. "Madoka...?"

"I—"

"...Your... alarm...?"

She shoots off the bed, intent on turning the alarm off.

Her foot catches the blankets, and she tumbles to the floor. "Ow..."

Homura immediately throws off her covers, but remains sitting as she holds her head. "Ugh." She closes her eyes, trying to will her body to catch up. "A-Are you alright, Madoka...?"

"Ah, I-I'm okay." She sits up, glad that the only thing hurt is her pride. "I just—" the alarm continues, and she groans. "Ugh, can we just redo this...?"

"...If you can figure out how to."

She sighs.

/

"Text me if there's any news," she reminds Homura as she readjusts her jacket. "Actually, call me—if anything happens. Or, even if you just—"

Homura lifts her arm from her face and turns to Madoka. "...You're going to be late."

Madoka huffs loudly so that Homura can hear her, because she's already closing her eyes and going back to sleep. Madoka approaches the bed, and stares at Homura who's half buried in her blankets.

"Homura-chan."

"Hm...?"

"...Are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

She sees Homura open her eyes, and it takes her a moment to focus in Madoka's general direction. "It won't make any sense for you to stay. At most, I'll receive a text from Keiichi-san telling me whether or not Satoshi survived."

"Homu—"

"And, if he did, I still won't be able to visit him. Go to class; I will message you as soon as I hear anything."

She moves to protest, but Homura closes her eyes.

"You haven't missed a single class so far, and it's important for you to attend, especially because finals are coming up."

"But—"

"It'll be better than you staying home and worrying about nothing. You're definitely going to be late if you don't leave soon."

Madoka sighs. "Fine. But, I'm serious—call me if anything happens."

Homura lifts Tora from the blankets and holds him out for Madoka to see. "I will. Tora-kun is my witness..." She pats the area next to her. "...Amy too... if I can find her..."

This earns her a small smile from Madoka.

"...I think you're still here."

She rolls her eyes, but the smile remains. "I'm leaving. If—nothing happens, I should be back before lunch. Your class is at 2, right?"

"...Yes, and you seem to still be here."

"I'm going, I'm going."

Homura hears the footsteps as Madoka exits the room. She pulls Tora close to her face, settling him there for at least another hour of sleep.

\\

She knew she should've insisted on staying; despite attending her class, her notes for today are blank, and she had spent almost every other minute checking her phone to see if there were any updates.

There had been brief panic when she had noticed a new message, and she had almost thrown her phone when she saw the sender had been Sayaka.

She breathes out a sigh of relief once she reaches their apartment. It doesn't take long until she's already pushing the door open. She slips her shoes off, before she closes the door behind her.

She turns, and is about to head to the bedroom when she sees a familiar figure sitting in the kitchen.

She immediately heads over.

Homura glances up from her notebook. "Welcome back."

"Mm, I'm back." She places her backpack on top of the breakfast bar. "Nothing?"

Homura shakes her head. "Well, it's more like there's no way to access that information."

Madoka frowns. "What do you mean?"

Homura flips the page. Her eyes skim the contents, and she marks her place before she closes the notebook shut.

"The uhm... hospital won't tell Keiichi-san Satoshi's condition because they're not related."

Madoka bites her lip. "But..."

"And, after that, Satoshi's mother told the hospital to withhold any information about him before you ask."

"What? W-Why..."

Homura shrugs. "I saw something mentioned on the news though. A small blurb, really, but it listed his condition as stable."

"What...?"

Homura taps her phone that's sitting nearby. "I was about to message you, but I heard the door opening."

Madoka finally takes a seat.

"I ate a little earlier, since I need to eat something before I take my medication. Our refrigerator is looking quite empty, if you disregard the leftovers. I'll probably go to the market after class; should I wait for you? Or is there anything you want me to buy?"

Madoka stares at her, feeling that it's incredibly odd that Homura's treating this like any other day.

"Homura-chan..."

Homura reaches for her notebook. "The milk is almost finished, and I want to buy some salad. Maybe I'll buy some granola and—"

"Homura-chan."

Homura's hand freezes, and she finally glances up.

"...How are you?"

Homura blinks. "...I'm fine."

Madoka sits up, and leans forward against the breakfast bar. "No. How are you? How are you doing? How are you holding up?"

Homura runs her fingers along the spiral of the notebook, gaze absent as she mulls over Madoka's questions.

"I... don't know." She glances over to her phone, knowing there's no messages waiting for her. "I'm..." she blinks. "I'm fine." She raises her head. "...Am I not supposed to be fine?"

Madoka slides off the chair and lowers her feet to the ground. She immediately covers their distance, and wraps her arms around Homura as soon as she's close enough.

"People deal with things differently," she murmurs into Homura's ear.

Homura tilts her head, leaning it against Madoka's. "But, you're supposed to feel—something, right...? I... I'm fine."

"It's—normal. Shock, and—"

Homura pulls away. "No. I mean... I... don't really care."

Madoka frowns. "Homura-chan—"

"But, I'm supposed to, right?"

Madoka stares at her. "Yesterday, you said that you prayed for him—"

To her surprise, Homura merely smiles. "Prayers don't really work, Madoka. Especially not selfish ones."

Her brow furrows. "Homura-chan...?"

"...More than Satoshi dying, I'm more worried about what will happen after. I—don't—want to deal with them. I—don't—want to attend another funeral. I'm—" Homura frowns, "I'm just thinking about how much of a hassle it'll be, afterwards..."

"You're just—in shock. Your brother is in the hospital, and you don't know whether or not he's okay. You're—"

Homura shakes her head. "No. I... really don't care. I don't—hate him, but it doesn't mean that I... care about him, either. I mentioned to you that we didn't get along when were younger."

Madoka nods slowly. "You did..."

To her frustration, Homura sits up, her eyes searching for the clock on the wall. "Mm, you should eat something."

Madoka places her hands on Homura's shoulders. "Homura-chan—"

Homura gently pulls away from her to stand. "I'm starting to get hungry again. Do you want coffee? Otherwise I'll just make a cup for myself."

"Homura-chan."

Homura moves to the kitchen and Madoka can only helplessly watch her.

"Madoka? Coffee?"

"S-Sure..."

"Okay."

Homura fills the carafe with water, and for a short while, there's only the sounds of Homura as she putters around the kitchen.

As they wait for the coffee to brew, Homura leans against the counter, back to the coffee maker as she stares outside the kitchen window.

"When we were younger," she says suddenly, "Satoshi blamed me—for ruining his family."

Madoka straightens up. "...What?"

Homura closes her eyes, and Madoka hates how there's an amused smile on her lips. "Nevermind that I never had a choice, on whether or not I wanted to stay with them. But—it's more embarrassing to give up a child to an institution, than to admit to adultery, apparently."

Madoka feels her stomach drop, and she moves forward to enter the kitchen.

Homura opens her eyes. "...I was in and out of the hospital a lot when I was younger." She glances over to Madoka, face once again expressionless. "Satoshi's —gotten a lot better, in terms of... everything, I suppose." Her eyes narrow, and she's staring at the floor. "But—"

She shakes her head.

"We—attended the same school; he hated it. Someone found out that we were related, and for a while people teased him because his sister—was 'the unwanted girl with the heart problem.'" She breathes out slowly. "I—slept a lot, because I was sick. But half the time, it wasn't because I was sick. It was more like, it was easier to just sleep. It—was easier than to pretend that I didn't know that no one wanted me there."

Madoka stares, unable to fathom why anyone would treat anyone like that.

"I'm..." Homura glances away once more, "I'm afraid, that if I see him, lying there, that I'll—" she cuts herself off with a soft laugh, and raises her hand, slipping it under her glasses to cover to eyes. "I slept—a lot. When I was in the hospital, they had to visit—to save face. But—most of the time, I pretended to be asleep so they would leave earlier."

"Homura-chan..."

Homura now has her face in her hands. "I—don't hate him," she repeats, and Madoka immediately rushes over when she sees that Homura is shaking. "I don't hate him—and—I know, I shouldn't want him to die."

Madoka throws her arms around her. "Shh, Homura-chan. It's okay. It'll be okay."

"But—all I remember is her telling me, reminding me that she's the only reason I'm still alive. S-She's the reason I hate berries; s-she's the reason why I hate myself so much."

Madoka grips her tightly as her eyes start to burn. "Homura-chan."

"She—loves him. She'll drop everything for him. I—don't hate him," she says once more. "I lied, when I said I don't really care."

Madoka rubs her back, feeling the tears pool at how much Homura has suffered.

"I-I'm a horrible person."

"You're not!"

"I-If Satoshi dies," Homura whispers, "i-if he dies, i-it'll hurt her, the most." She moves, and buries her face into Madoka's neck. "T-That's all I keep thinking. N-Not that he'll be fine, o-or that I'll miss him if he's gone. She'll—blame me, like she always does, b-but this time it w-would actually be my fault."

She grasps Madoka's shirt, bunching up the fabric in her fingers.

"...And i-it makes me happy, k-knowing that I-I'm the reason she's crying."

Madoka grits her teeth, and as she blinks, the tears finally fall. "Homura-chan..."

"I-I'm the worst," Homura whisper**s.**

AN: o_o hm. You know, I understand why people stop updating/writing;;; It's just so difficult to keep a consistent schedule.

Ah, every time I upload a new chapter, I get too excited and forget this part:

Thank you for reading and reviewing! I... find it difficult to want to update sometimes, but, knowing that there's people waiting (for some reasonn)) I'll continue to try my best;;; Thank you again;; Also, sorry if it feels like I'm ignoring you if I don't respond to your questions in your reviews;; I do read them! I just have horrible social skills, and I'm just not sure if you're reeeeaally asking, or if it's just... musings. Again, if you're actually super confused about something, feel free to send a pm, so that way I will know if you actually want an answer or not. Or don't; I don't know. Breathe will continue to be vague though :)))))))

She understands that people cope in different ways.

She understands this, but it doesn't hurt any less when Homura pushes away from her, and disappears into the bedroom to hide her tears.

She fidgets; she nervously waits, first on the couch, and then by pacing in the living room, thoughts going round in circles as she debates going in after her, or leaving her alone.

Her choice is made for her when she hears a sound down the hall, and Homura finally emerges from the room. Madoka stops pacing, and takes a moment to process what she's seeing.

Out of all things, she did not expect to see Homura dressed for the day, glasses now exchanged for her contacts as her tattered side bag hangs over her shoulder.

Her eyes flicker to the clock, and they widen when she realizes that Homura's going to class.

Almost two hours early.

"...Homura-chan."

Homura lowers her head and slowly pads over to the kitchen; Madoka follows her.

"...I'll swing by the market, after class," Homura tells her as she starts stuffing her notebooks haphazardly into her bag. "Did you need anything?"

She stands behind her, wringing her hands. Once Homura is done and her bag is zipped, she turns to Madoka in question.

"Madoka?"

Her normal pale complexion verges on almost ghostly white, and she can see traces of her tears in her still swollen eyes.

She swallows whatever trepidation she has, and finally rocks forward, arms reaching out to gather Homura in her arms.

"Homura-chan..."

Her body is stiff, and when Homura tries to pull away, she holds on tightly.

"Madoka... I—need to—"

She refuses to let go. "Homura-chan... maybe... you shouldn't go to class today."

Homura inhales deeply. Madoka tenses, wondering—worrying that Homura will push her away.

"...What—else—would I do then...? Stay here, and—" she cuts herself off, gulping in another deep breath to stop the overflow of emotions.

Tentatively, Madoka moves back, enough for a glimpse of Homura's face.

She's glaring at the floor—and who knows what thoughts are running through her mind.

Madoka glances once more to the clock, before she pulls Homura close again.

"Let's—go out then. We'll—grab lunch, and then head to the market at the plaza," she says softly.

"...You—should be studying—I can—"

She shakes her head. "You're more important than that, Homura-chan."

The seconds tick by, and she's waiting for that inevitable rejection. Instead, she feels Homura shift, before thin arms return her hug.

"...I—wouldn't mind..."

She nods, smiling sadly, "let's go to lunch then, Homura-chan."

Homura closes her eyes. "...what—about the coffee...?"

Sometimes, like right now, Madoka wants to knock some sense into Homura's head, hoping that it could somehow set her priorities straight.

"Leave it. We can freeze it later—or reheat it in the microwave. It—doesn't matter." Madoka tells her.

Hesitantly, Homura nods. "...Okay."

/

They walk in silence, Homura's hand clasped tightly in hers as they make their way through the streets.

Every so often, she glances to Homura—in nervousness—in reassurance that she's still there. She's still afraid she's going to break away from her any second.

Another glance, and instead of that passive profile with that sharp jawline, she finds a pair of lavender eyes staring back.

She jumps, startled at being caught. Homura stops walking, and brushes her hair back with her free hand.

"Is... there something wrong, Madoka?"

"Ah..." She moves to the side, letting a stranger pass. They're given a curious look, before they're ignored as the stranger continues down the street.

"Madoka...?"

Madoka shakes her head. "I—was just..."

She feels a squeeze on her hand, and then a tug as Homura resumes walking.

"I'm fine," she murmurs softly.

Madoka opens her mouth, but the small smile Homura gives her stops her words.

"...Even if I'm not, I will be." Once more, Homura faces forward, her smile dropping away almost immediately.

Madoka sighs softly and lengthens her stride to fall into step with Homura.

\\

There's only a handful of restaurants that they know of since it's cheaper and healthier to cook and eat at home. On the other side of the city, there's a small, quaint cafe that Homura had introduced Madoka to a few months back that she had instantly taken a liking to. The atmosphere is cozy, and their menu is simple, filled with sandwiches and drinks that are on par, yet different, than their usual coffee shop.

And most importantly, it's not too expensive.

It's been a while since they had last visited, and there are no recognizable workers seen when they enter. All the tables inside are occupied, and the host offers them a table on the patio. They don't mind soaking in the sunlight, and they follow their waitress out the side entrance to their seats.

Three out of the four tables are filled with customers, and they're lead to the last empty table. Once seated, they're handed their menus, and the waitress bows, excusing herself, and giving them a few minutes alone to decide.

From behind her menu, Madoka glances at Homura who's scouring over the specials.

Homura looks up, and blinks when she finds Madoka's eyes on her. "Madoka...?"

She squeaks and lowers her eyes to her menu. "Yes, Homura-chan?"

"...Would you like to split one of the lunch specials? I ate earlier, so you can have my side dish...?"

She nods. "That's fine." She flips the page, and immediately skims the drinks. "Oh, Homura-chan—they have a new drink."

"Hm...?" Homura turns her menu. She quirks an eyebrow at Madoka. "...That sounds..."

"Interesting," Madoka finishes as she nods. "I think I'll order it. What will you get, Homura-chan?"

Homura shakes her head. "I'll—order a coffee blend, just in case you want to switch with me if you dislike your drink."

Madoka sticks out her tongue, before she once again browses the menu.

It takes a few more minutes until the waitress returns, and they rattle off their orders to her.

"I'll be back with your drinks in a short while."

"Thank you," Madoka murmurs, watching as the waitress disappears back into the restaurant.

She turns her attention to Homura, who is now absently observing the few sparrows that dart around the planters surrounding the patio.

Her eyes soften, and she rests her elbow on the table to lean her chin against her hand. The way Homura's eyes seem to flicker about as she follows the agile birds around makes her smile. A small breeze can be felt in the area, lightly tousling their hair—and she has a sudden urge to run her hands through Homura's hair, wanting to feel that silkiness along her fingertips.

The murmurs of the nearby patrons, and the bright sunlight shining through the canopies fade away; she only sees Homura in front of her.

She doesn't even realize she's zoning out—until there's a light clatter on their table, and the waitress sets down their drinks. She blushes, immediately sitting up and hoping that Homura hadn't noticed.

A sneaked glance, and like always, Homura's face is unreadable.

"One mocha blend," Homura raises her hand, and the waitress slides her drink over, "and one coffee mix." Madoka's drink is set down in front of her. "Is there anything else I can help you ladies with?"

Madoka shakes her head. "No—we're fine, for now, thank you."

The waitress gives a polite smile. "Enjoy your drinks. Your food should be out shortly."

"Thank you," Madoka murmurs again.

The waitress leaves, and they both turn to their drinks. Homura reaches for her straw, but Madoka stops her, holding out her hand.

"Wait, let me take a picture first, Homura-chan." She quickly pulls out her phone, and Homura slides her drink over, placing it by Madoka's.

After three attempts, Madoka is finally satisfied with her picture. As she sends a quick message to Sayaka, Homura retrieves her drink, fingers wrapping around the cooled glass. Condensation runs down the side, and she removes her hand to drag one finger across the surface.

"Okay, let's try this one out," Madoka says as she reaches for the spoon on the saucer.

Homura nods, pulling her drink closer. As she sips her familiar drink, she watches as Madoka finally brings the cup to her mouth.

When Madoka's face twists, Homura immediately grabs her own drink into her hand, sitting up and suddenly turning to the side, pretending not to notice.

"How is your drink, Madoka?" she asks, deliberately not looking at her.

Madoka coughs. "It's—really bitter...?"

"Maybe you can add some more milk or sugar to it?"

Madoka nods, looking around for something to wash the taste away. She finally sees that Homura is sipping at her drink out of her arm's reach, and pouts.

"Homura-chan..."

"Yes, Madoka?"

"Can I have a sip of your drink, please?"

It's—a familiar, comfortable sight of the Homura that she knows, and she juts her lower lip out ever so slightly, eyes watching, and easily pinpointing Homura's cave-in.

Homura sighs, and offers her her drink.

She smiles, "thank you, Homura-chan. Would you like to try mine?"

Lavender flickers down, before her eyes narrow at the small cup. "...Alright."

/

For a while, they pretend that things are okay, easily enjoying their meal with each other's company. There's the usual teasing, the sharp jokes, and the soft laugh that Homura always hides behind her hand.

Madoka takes it all in, knowing that once they exit the restaurant, the real world will once again come crashing down.

And maybe Homura thinks the same, because they stay there a bit longer than usual, until the lunch crowd trickles out, and they're the last ones still picking at their plates.

It's only after the waitress makes another round, eyes and face maybe a bit more strained, that they finally push away from the table, and head inside to pay their bill.

A quick visit to the restroom, before they step outside, and whatever little bubble they're in slowly cracks, and fades away.

They squint at the bright afternoon sun, as the sounds of cars, and the whispers of city life re-enter their ears.

Homura's face once more becomes blank, and Madoka once more takes her hand.

"Let's—go to the market?" she asks softly, pressing her fingers around Homura's.

Homura nods, and they turn around, heading into the direction of the shopping plaza.

\\

Though Homura prefers the smaller local market for their groceries, once they run out of milk, they usually head to the larger supermarket in one of the busier plazas close to their school.

To Homura's relief, early Monday afternoon is devoid of the crowd normally seen in this area; most likely because a number of students are in class.

They cross the street, and make their way under the arc to enter the shopping center. The market sits at the end of a long path of shops, and Madoka points to the displays in the windows as Homura looks on with her typical disinterest.

When they finally reach the market, the automatic doors open, releasing a rush of cold air that clashes with the tepid temperature outside. Homura grabs one of the small baskets provided that she always insists on carrying, and too used to it by now, Madoka makes no protest. They swing right, and head to the vegetable section for their selection of greens.

Madoka is slower as she browses, and Homura leaves her side to grab the produce she had seen on sale in the ads. The first time Madoka had gone to the market with Homura, she had been confused with her choices, but now she knows that Homura merely chooses whatever is marked down for the week.

Madoka bites her lip, her eyes now searching for Homura, and finds her in the midst of choosing a bundle of scallions. She glances to the side, and evaluates the packet of mushrooms in her hands.

She quickly assesses what she can make, and, considering their heavy meals this weekend, something light like a soup would be ideal to clean their palate.

By the time Homura joins her side, she has a number of vegetables in her hand, and a few days of meals planned in her mind.

The basket dips as she deposits them inside, but Homura holds steady.

"Is there anything else you need from here, Homura-chan?"

Homura shakes her head. "No."

"Okay."

They continue shopping, and some protein is added to their basket: lean meat, and a small pack of eggs. A carton of milk is precariously squeezed into the growing pile, and though Madoka notices when Homura switches grip every so often, she pretends not to, and instead points towards the sauce aisle.

"Oh, maybe they have that salad dressing here," Madoka murmurs as her eyes glaze past the bottles.

Their basket is abandoned at their feet, and she helps Homura search.

None of them seem even remotely similar, and after a brief debate on whether or not they should try something new, they instead settle on their usual choice of dressing: a light Italian that they both enjoy since it's not as sour.

As Homura stoops to retrieve their basket, there's a vaguely familiar voice in the direction where Madoka is standing.

"Kaname-san? And... Akemi-san?"

She glances up in curiosity.

"...Tomoe-san?" Madoka blinks.

Mami's surprised face morphs into a friendly smile. "What a coincidence, running into you two here."

/

Mami is just as polite as she was yesterday, and Homura is just as off-putting. Madoka smiles though, enough for the both of them.

As the two chat, Homura listens with only half an ear; she's not interested in idle talk, and she doesn't know Mami enough to want to pretend that she is.

Mami is dressed just as simply as she was the other day, and Homura's mind wanders briefly, wondering of the blonde's relationship with the volatile redhead.

She doesn't care enough however, and turns her attention to reading random labels as Madoka and Mami continue to converse.

Mami is disappointed when Madoka turns down her invite to a small cafe around the corner, but she doesn't press them, which Homura grudgingly appreciates. They do manage to finalize plans and arrange to meet later in the week for lunch.

They part ways with a wave and a bow, before Madoka follows Homura as they continue their shopping.

"That was... surprising, seeing her here," Madoka murmurs as she glances over to Homura.

"Mm." Homura's eyes are trailing along the shelves, obviously distracted. "Their hotel is probably somewhere in the area."

"Most likely... she's nice though."

Homura can feel Madoka watching her, and she turns to face her. "...What is it?"

"You, uhm, don't have to go to lunch if you don't want to, Homura-chan..."

"...It's fine. They're only here for another week, aren't they? The chances of running into them will be... unlikely, once they return to Kazamino..."

Madoka nods. "Yes... that's—true."

"...I want to buy a few snacks," Homura says as she leads her over to the next aisle, "and then we'll be done?"

"Oh!" Madoka claps lightly as she remembers something. "I want to get those sweet potato chips we bought last time... You liked those too, didn't you, Homura-chan?"

"Yes."

"I'll buy two—no, maybe three packs this time...?"

"...Don't blame me when you complain your weight went up—Ow—"

Madoka moves her hand away, and starts searching the shelves for her snacks. "I remember they were by these other chips... Oh, maybe I should get those instead...?"

Whatever Homura is about to say is cut off when Madoka glares at her.

Homura nods, reaching behind her to fidget with her hair. "Yes, you'll... need... snacks... to help you study..."

Beaming, Madoka turns back to the selection of items.

She does hear Homura mutter something under her breath, and her hand shoots out to smack her on the shoulder.

"Ow..."

\\

They walk now at a slower pace, bags rustling and weighing them down as they head home.

Homura has once again fallen into silence, though she occasionally responds with vague agreements to at least reassure Madoka that she's listening.

It's not beyond her typical behavior, and maybe the only thing that's an indication of her inner turmoil is the way her lips dip down a little more than usual.

Madoka's random chattering slowly fades into silence as she struggles with her words, trying to think of something—anything to keep Homura from thinking whatever she's thinking.

Distracted, it takes her a moment to register the light buzzing heard. Her eyes widen, and she turns to Homura in alarm.

Homura stares at her jacket pocket, eyes moving from side to side as she debates whether or not to pick up.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura shifts the bags from her right hand to her left, before she digs into her pocket for her phone. The buzzing stops as soon as the device is pulled out, and Madoka waits with bated breath as Homura flicks her finger to unlock the screen.

Another brief buzz is heard, and Madoka watches as Homura scans the contents.

Finally, those guarded eyes meet hers. "...Keiichi-san managed to get in contact with—Satoshi's uncle. Satoshi—is fine," Madoka breathes a sigh of relief, "and, maybe... a visit can be arranged at the end of the week—after... after things settle down..."

"That's—that's good," Madoka responds, feeling her chest lighten at the news. It doesn't last long though, when she sees Homura is still staring at her phone, gripping it hard enough that the white of her knuckles can be seen.

Gently, Madoka places a hand to Homura's wrist. Homura starts at her touch, almost dropping her phone in the process.

"It's good news, Homura-chan. Satoshi-san is fine," Madoka says softly, her own fingers working to loosen Homura's death grip.

Homura's eyes narrow briefly, before they flicker to the side. "Yes, it's—good," she murmurs as she relaxes her hand. "We... uhm, should get going..." She gives Madoka an unconvincing smile, and her phone once more disappears into her pocket.

She redistributes the bags back into both hands, and starts walking. Madoka remains in place, staring at those shoulders that slump, bearing a weight that she doesn't know anything about.

Homura stops, and looks around when she doesn't see Madoka by her side. "Madoka?"

Madoka quickly jogs to catch up with her, ignoring how the bags swing and hit her legs as she runs.

"I'm here, Homura-chan."

Homura blinks, and the relief Madoka can see in her eyes makes her want to reach out and hold her. She doesn't, but she moves as close to Homura as possible.

She knows though, that their grocery bags aren't the only reason there's distance in between them.

/

The rest of their walk is quiet, and it takes all of Madoka's will power not to glance at Homura every few seconds.

They finally arrive home, and after their shoes are off and the door is locked, it's when they're passing the couch that Homura suddenly reaches out, her hand gripping Madoka's arm tightly.

She turns to her in surprise. "Homura-chan?"

"A—bout, earlier..." Homura bows her head, her eyes now concentrated on the floor. "When—I—in the kitchen..."

Madoka patiently waits for Homura to gather her thoughts.

The fingers on her sweater slacken, and Homura's brow furrows. "Could... you—just forget," Homura timidly raises her head, eyes nervously moving to avoid eye-contact.

Madoka can see she's trembling, and it makes her heart drop.

"...could—you—forget... what I said earlier...?"

Instead of replying, Madoka places her bags down on the coffee table, keeping her eyes on Homura as she does so. She takes the bags from Homura, and also sets those on the table. Once done, she reaches for Homura's arms, and guides her to the couch to take a seat.

"Homura-chan..."

"It was—" Homura fumbles with her words, eyes flicking nervously to anywhere that isn't Madoka's face, "it was—stupid of me, to mention it. It—"

Madoka closes her eyes, breathing in slowly. Homura is still making excuses when she opens her eyes. She reaches forward, and cuts off whatever else Homura wants to say as she hugs her close.

Homura is jumpy and stiff—and it reminds her of the first time she had given her a hug.

She gently strokes her hair, fighting back her own tears.

"...You're—not a bad person, Homura-chan. Everyone, no matter who they are, thinks selfish thoughts sometimes. That—woman—" she grits her teeth, remembering that painful sight of that hand connecting with Homura's face, "she's—she's a bad person. No one blames you—for thinking those things. But that's all they are—they're just thoughts. You weren't the one who stabbed your brother—you aren't the reason why he's in the hospital."

"That's—I—"

Madoka lets go briefly to wipe her face, before she turns back to Homura with fresh tears in her eyes. "It doesn't make you a bad person—" she sniffles, her sight now blurring as she remembers how lost Homura had looked—how lost she looks even now. "You're wonderful—and smart—and kind—and—I wish you could see that a-about yourself."

Homura sits up in confusion when she sees Madoka crying. "Madoka...? Wait—why are you crying?"

Madoka shakes her head, her lips quivering as she tries to stop her tears. "I-It's just—" She squeezes her eyes shut as her shoulders droop down. "I-I'm sorry—I can't—I—don't know—how to h-help you—"

"Madoka...?"

Madoka turns to bury her face into Homura's shoulder. "Y-Your heart—and—your—family—and I—"

She throws her body forward, and unprepared for her weight, Homura falls back onto the couch with Madoka now lying on top of her, sobbing into her jacket.

Homura looks around anxiously as Madoka continues to cry. Finally, she tentatively wraps her arms around those shaking shoulders.

"I just—want to be t-there for you..." Madoka whispers.

Homura sighs, her arms now holding Madoka tightly.

She's—never known anyone so honest, and definitely no one as caring.

"...Thank you," she murmurs into her ear.

\\

She blinks in confusion, eyes trying to focus as something black floods her sight. She stares at it blankly, before she realizes that something is also moving underneath her.

A slow, steady rhythm that continuously raises and falls.

And—for some reason, her face is lying on something uncomfortably damp.

She uses her hands to brace herself up, head lifting as she tries to blink away her sleepiness. She wipes at her eyes, and is in the middle of wiping her face when she promptly freezes, finally registering Homura's sleeping face a small distance away.

Her eyes widen and her neck heats up as she realizes she's practically sprawled over Homura, and that her hand is—

She sits up quickly, face now full blown red when her actions do not help the situation whatsoever as her legs are still entangled with Homura's.

She's still panicking when a familiar voice, thick with sleep, interrupts her thoughts.

"...Madoka?"

"Ah," she swallows nervously, "s-sorry, Homura-chan... I—fell asleep...? Uhm, sorry, about your jacket..."

"Mm...?" Homura is rubbing her eyes, not at all bothered that Madoka is still sitting on top of her. "Oh. It's okay. I'm not surprised we fell asleep though, we didn't get much sleep last night..."

She nods, "Y-Yeah..."

Homura stares at her for a few seconds. "Uhm... Madoka...?"

"Y-Yes?"

"...Could you move, please?"

Madoka flushes, "yes—of course, sorry!" She scrambles off her, stumbling slightly as she tries to shake away her disorientation. She regains her balance as Homura sits up.

Homura is yawning into her open hand when she hears Madoka cry out.

"We forgot to put the milk into the refrigerator!"

Homura wipes her eyes dry, before she glances to the clock. "It should be okay still —we didn't sleep for that long."

She pushes off the couch, standing to help Madoka carry the groceries into the kitchen.

/

After they load the perishables into the refrigerator, they both change into their jerseys, before they head back to the kitchen to start their preparations for dinner.

It's a bit early, but neither of them are in the mood to work on their school work for various reasons.

Madoka hums a random tune as she packs the earlier brewed coffee away, and the familiarity of the atmosphere has Homura finally relaxing as she helps wash the vegetables. Once they're cleaned, she hands them off to Madoka.

"Thank you, Homura-chan," Madoka smiles as she accepts the bowl of vegetables. She places it down on the counter, right by the cutting board and knife that has been set out by the sink.

Homura wipes her hands dry. "What else should I help with?"

"Uhmmmm." Madoka glances around. "Oh! Could you make the rice?"

"Sure. One pot of rice, coming right up."

Instead of starting her own task, Madoka watches as Homura digs through the cabinets for a colander. She's still watching when Homura stands, and then moves to cross over the room, heading to the small pantry where they keep the dry items.

She stops when she sees Madoka looking at her. She blinks in confusion, and tilts her head. "Is... there something wrong?"

"Ah," Madoka blushes, and quickly averts her eyes. "N-Nothing. Sorry—I was... just thinking—of the first time I met you."

It's not a blatant lie, and she gives herself a mental pat on the back for her quick response.

Homura continues on her way to the pantry. She briefly disappears behind the door, only to reappear with a small bag in her hands. It's placed on the counter next to the colander, and there's the sound of crumpling paper as Homura pulls open the rice bag.

Madoka wonders if Homura had heard her—but Homura's next words answers her question.

"What—about it?"

Homura peers into the bag, locating the measuring cup already inside. Two cups are measured, before being emptied into the colander. As the grains flow and bounce off the plastic container, the high pitched twinkling sounds remind Madoka of Tora—like the little beads stuffed into his feet.

That thought is pushed aside as another one takes precedence. Madoka smiles—the coffee shop has a special place in her heart—and after that, is the almost burnt pasta dish that Homura had made on that unforgettable day.

"It just reminded me why I'm the one in charge of the kitchen," she says finally.

As expected, Homura turns to her, one eyebrow lifted in obvious offense.

Madoka responds with a grin. "You almost burned your old apartment down, Homura-chan."

Homura turns back to the rice, and maybe she's a bit more rough as she crumples the bag closed. "...None of them would have noticed regardless. In fact, it might've been an improvement."

Madoka laughs, glad that Homura seems to be feeling better enough to joke around. "That's true."

"...Truthfully," Homura says as she pads over to the sink, colander in hand, "I was, uhm, kind of nervous that day..."

Madoka blinks. "You were?"

Homura faces the sink, and the little bit of her face that Madoka can see is slightly tinged red. "Yes—it was... well, let's just say that sometimes, I wonder what made me... talk to you, that day..."

Madoka reaches out and taps Homura's shoulder lightly with a closed fist. "What? You mean to tell me that you don't offer help to anyone who spills coffee all over you in front of a crowded shop?"

She's smiling when Homura turns to her. "...No, not really."

Maybe it's the trick of the light, but Madoka sees—something—in Homura's eyes. Unconsciously, her gaze flickers down briefly, before they return to lock on Homura's eyes.

She takes a step forward. "Homura-chan..."

Homura blinks, breaking eye-contact when she hears the buzz from her phone.

Madoka barely refrains from grasping her head in frustration.

"I'll—be right back," Homura murmurs as she passes by.

"...Okay."

\\

Homura disappears into the bedroom again with her phone, and Madoka distracts herself by continuing the preparations for dinner. She doesn't trust herself with a knife just yet, and instead takes over Homura's task of making rice.

She's pushing the button to set the timer when Homura finally returns to the living room. There's an audible beep for confirmation, and she watches as Homura approaches the breakfast bar. The phone makes a small clack as she sets it down.

"Sorry," Homura says softly, glancing to the rice cooker, "I was supposed to make the rice..."

Madoka shakes her head. "No—it's fine." She wipes down her hands on a dishcloth, and nervously licks her lips. "Is... everything okay?"

Homura absently reaches behind her to fidget with her hair. "...Yes. The—anesthesia is starting to wear off, and they say that Satoshi may regain consciousness later tonight, or tomorrow..."

Madoka twists the cloth in her hands. "T-That's good, isn't it?"

"...His wound—isn't as bad as Keiichi-san initially thought. It—was in his shoulder, and they managed to repair most of the damage; he'll... have to go through physical therapy, and there may be some side effects, but, he's... okay."

Madoka knows this is good news—but Homura's reaction says otherwise.

"Homura-chan...?"

"I'm—glad—he's okay..." Homura mumbles, eyes now staring blankly at the counter top.

Madoka abandons the cloth and hurriedly exits the kitchen to join Homura's side. "Homura-chan?"

"I—should be glad he's—okay...right...?"

Madoka gently places her hands on Homura's shoulders. "...Are you, Homura-chan?"

Homura nods slowly. "I—think so... I—didn't want him to die..."

Madoka's hands move up, until they're gently cupping Homura's face. "Homura-chan? Look at me, please?"

She lifts her head, and Madoka hates—just how lost Homura looks.

"Your brother is going to be okay..."

"He is..."

"How—does it make you feel?"

Homura's mouth opens slightly, before it clicks shut. "I—don't know..."

"Happy? Relieved? ...Sad?"

Homura finally pulls back to turn away from her. "I—don't know—"

"Homura-chan?"

"Relieved...?"

"Are you happy that he's alive?"

"I—don't—" Homura whirls around, eyes angry—shining with unshed tears. "I—don't know!" She angrily swipes at her eyes, trying to stop the flow of tears. "W—

hy, couldn't he—just leave me alone?" she whispers, her body bowing forward as she covers her face with her hands. "I—don't want to see them—I don't—want—" she hiccups, struggling to choke back her tears.

Madoka steps forward to hug her tightly. "It'll be okay, Homura-chan. You can cry." She kisses the top of Homura's head as hands grip her almost desperately. "You can cry as much as you want to."

/

They end up once again on the couch, this time Homura clinging onto her.

Her sobs slowly quiet down, and Madoka gently strokes Homura's back as the occasional sniffles break the silence.

"...Madoka?"

"Hm...?"

"I'm—okay now..."

Madoka pulls away as Homura does the same. She has a glance of Homura's tear-stained face, before Homura quickly hides her face behind her bangs.

"I'll, uhm... be right back..." She removes herself from Madoka's lap, stumbling slightly in her haste to head to the bathroom.

Madoka breathes out slowly as she leans against the cushions. She's lost in her own thoughts, and it isn't until she feels the couch move, that she realizes that Homura has rejoined her.

As Homura stares straight ahead, Madoka takes a moment to examine her profile. Her familiar glasses are now sitting on her face, and she can see her puffy eyes—red—bloodshot.

And—somehow—still beautiful.

Her chest tightens as she realizes just how much she loves her—and how much it hurts her to know that Homura's hurting.

"I'm sorry," Homura blurts out as she gives a timid side glance.

Anger blooms in her chest, but she barely manages to keep it in check. "...For what, Homura-chan?"

"For—" Homura gestures helplessly. Her voice drops to a whisper. "Can... we forget—about that, too...?"

Madoka remains quiet, silently counting backwards in her head to calm herself down. She grips the armrest tightly, her eyes stinging from her frustration.

"Homura-chan..."

Homura stiffens, her eyes now lowered to the floor. "I'm sorry—"

"Stop saying that!" Her words erupt and something twists in her heart when she sees Homura flinch—because of her. She places her hand to the bridge of her nose, taking deep breaths and exhaling to contain her anger.

"...It—won't happen again," Homura mumbles as she tugs on her jacket sleeves. "It was—I'm... sorry. I'll—I'll help, uhm, finish dinner..." She's moving to stand when Madoka turns to her.

"Homura-chan."

Whatever she hears in Madoka's voice has her freezing in place.

Madoka sighs softly, and somehow tries to get her body to relax. "Homura-chan... maybe—maybe 'forgetting about it' isn't the best thing to do."

Half out of her seat, Homura glances at her, and Madoka's expression has her lowering her body back to the couch.

"It's—okay," Homura mumbles. "Satoshi is fine—and, things will return back to normal soon."

Madoka's hands curl into fists. "...What's—normal, Homura-chan?"

Homura blinks. "What—do you mean...?"

Madoka breathes in deeply, letting her anger drain as she breathes out. She scoots closer to Homura to take her hands.

"Before this weekend—I didn't even know you were—" she pauses, trying to keep from choking up, "—sick. I—didn't know that you had a half-brother living in the same city as us. I—didn't know anything," she whispers. "Just—what—is normal to you, Homura-chan?"

Homura searches her eyes, not understanding why Madoka looks about ready to cry once more. "I..." She looks away.

"I told you, that I want to be here for you, Homura-chan." Madoka squeezes her hands, forcing her gaze back. "I understand, that you don't—want to be treated differently... but, when—these kinds of things affect you this much... I—don't want to forget about it—I—don't want to pretend that things are okay, when they're obviously not."

Homura's eyes nervously flit around. "But—"

"I'm right here, Homura-chan. Whether you like it or not, I'm here for you."

Homura draws back. "...Why?"

Another twist in her heart. "Why—what?"

Homura moves her hands away easily, because Madoka is no longer holding on. "Why—do you care so much—about me? Why—are you so nice to me? Why—" she swallows, "why do you care—about someone like me?"

Madoka grits her teeth in frustration—in absolutely anger, because she knows that that woman is the reason why Homura can't even understand why—anyone—would love her.

"Why? Why?" Her voice slowly grows in volume as her anger overflows. "*Why*?" she hisses as she drags her palm across her eyes, swiping at her tears. "Why would I care about you?"

She's out of her seat, her nervous and angry energy making it hard to sit still.

"Why?" she mumbles under her breath, her feet now moving as she paces in front of the couch. "Homura-chan—is asking me—why—I care about her—this—" she shoots Homura a glare, "this idiot here, is asking me—why I care about her."

Homura blinks in confusion. "Madoka...?"

Madoka takes a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds, before breathing out. She turns to face Homura, who is still watching her.

Who's—still so obviously lost.

She opens her mouth, but closes it again. She shakes her head.

"Homura-chan... we're friends, and friends care about each other."

Homura nervously glances around. "I... wouldn't know. I—have never had a friend."

Madoka steps forward to grasp Homura's hands. "You have me."

"Ah..."

A bashful Homura is a rare sight, and Madoka takes a few seconds to commit it to memory, before she gently tugs Homura up.

"Let's... finish making dinner, Homura-chan."

Homura's relief is almost palatable; the tension seems to drop from her face at the change of topic. She nods. "Okay."

Madoka squeezes Homura's hand again. "We'll... get through this together, okay?"

She pauses. "...Okay."

Madoka smiles, and Homura glances back down.

"Madoka...?"

"Yes, Homura-chan?"

"...Thank you."

"You're welcome, Homura-chan."

She leads the way to the kitchen, and though it makes her happy to see Homura feeling better, her chest feels constricted—because she knows that now is not the right time to confess her love for this thick-headed girl.

She looks behind her, and Homura gives her a shy glance.

It makes her smile, and lessens the ache—if only just a little.

/

She snaps her workbook closed, and the yawn she's fighting comes back tenfold. She wipes her eyes dry, before checking the time on the wall clock.

Fifteen minutes until 11, and as usual, Homura is taking a shower.

She drags her hand over her face; the weekend is catching up to her, and she's about ready to fall asleep.

Her books are deposited back into her bag, and after making sure that she has everything packed, she heads over to the bedroom to change.

As she's pulling out her pajamas, the bathroom door opens, and Homura emerges fresh from her shower, dressed in her sleeping clothes.

"I'm done," Homura murmurs when she notices Madoka rifling through the drawers.

Madoka stifles another yawn. "Mm, I'm just going to shower tomorrow after I wake up."

Homura nods, moving to the closet to put away her own clothes. "You should go to sleep if you're tired."

"I will," Madoka replies as she heads to the bathroom. She pauses by the door, "after you take your medicine."

Homura blinks. She turns, but the sight of the bathroom door closing stops the question from being asked. She sighs softly, and finishes organizing her clothes.

When Madoka steps out, Homura is sitting on the bed with a familiar plastic container in her hand. They lock eyes briefly, before Homura pushes off the bed, container still held tightly.

She waits for Madoka to place her clothes on top of the dresser, and then they both head to the kitchen.

As Homura starts getting her medicine ready, Madoka retrieves a glass from the cabinets to fill with water.

"Thank you," Homura murmurs when Madoka sets the cup down.

Madoka nods, and takes a seat next to Homura, forgoing her usual seat across from her.

She closes her eyes, listening to the rustle and crackle of plastic as Homura continues to extract her pills.

Many things have happened this weekend; many things that now remind her that there's an invisible clock ticking in the background.

As soon as the sounds stop, she opens her eyes, and turns to face Homura.

A glance at the time, and she catches the end of the digits scrolling down to double ones and zeros.

On cue, Homura reaches for her medication, and starts knocking back each pill, washing them down with a gulp of water right after.

Homura doesn't ask, but Madoka is out of her seat as soon as the last drop in the glass is gone. The cup is snatched out of her hand and then refilled a moment later.

"Thank you..." Homura gives her a nervous glance, before she moves to take a long drink of her water.

Once finished, Homura stands to place the cup into the sink.

Blinking slowly, Madoka follows suit.

As they pass the couch, Madoka's eyes flicker over to it, unconsciously remembering this afternoon; remembering Homura's breakdown.

Breakdowns.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura stops. "Yes, Madoka?" Her voice is quiet; unsure. Nervous.

"Do you... want to sleep with me tonight?"

"I'm..."

Madoka waits, and it's quiet enough that she can hear Homura's slow exhale.

"...Would that be alright?"

She reaches over to take Homura's hand. "It's more than alright," she replies with a gentle smile.

Homura glances down, before her eyes once more meets hers. "Thank you."

Madoka squeezes her hand. "What are friends for, Homura-chan?"

It earns her a small smile that slowly chips at her heart.

Hand in hand, they head to the bedroom.

She squeezes Homura's hand once more, and this time Homura gives her a puzzled look.

She shakes her head, offering another smile.

The growing confusion on Homura's face brightens her mood, and she walks faster, tugging Homura through the hallway.

\\

With the lights off and the blankets pulled up, they settle into bed.

Madoka faces Homura, waiting for her eyes adjust to the darkness. She can hear and feel as Homura moves around, once again trying to get comfortable.

"Homura-chan?" She keeps her voice soft.

"Hm...?"

"...You can come closer, if you want."

Her movements stop, and Madoka struggles to make out Homura's face in the waning light.

The bed dips lightly, and she can suddenly feel Homura's body heat next to her as she slides in close. Something tickles her face, and she relaxes when she realizes that it's merely Tora and Amy.

She smiles, and pats them affectionately, knowing how fond Homura is of her plushies even though she would never admit it. She also knows that Tora most likely shares the most of Homura's memories, and though it's silly, she's briefly envious of him, wondering just how much of Homura's life has been seen in those plastic eyes.

She shakes her head; she'll earn Homura's trust, and somehow unlock those memories on her own.

She can vaguely see Homura staring at her, and she extends her hand. There's no response and Madoka realizes that Homura most likely can't see. Remembering Homura's sleeping habits, she slips her hand under the pillows, and Homura jumps when she feels something touch her fingers.

"Sorry," Madoka smiles sheepishly, "that's my hand, Homura-chan."

"Oh..."

It takes a moment until their fingers are intertwined.

"How are you feeling, Homura-chan?"

"Okay. Tired..."

"We should get some sleep then. Goodnight, Homura-chan."

"...Goodnight, Madoka."

She smiles, eyes closing when Homura still holds her hand tightly.

She has a feeling that things will be far from 'normal' from now on, but, she also knows that she's willing to work through the good and the bad, as long as Homura lets he**r.**

AN: Ahh, it took me long enough to update-perhaps...? Also, *stores the extra 1.3kwords from this chapter, and uses it for another chapter. (What do you mean it doesn't work that way?!)

Anyways, thank you for reading and thank you for your reviews ! I apologize for... the ~2 month+ delay for this chapter; I'll try and continue my usual 1 month updates from now on (hopefully... *fingers crossed in a lie?). I hope everyone is doing well, and if not, that you eventually will be. (If you're also curious, cat's cradle update most likely soon, within the week...?)

Thank you again; I hope all of you are sticking to your new year's resolutions :)) because I sure haven't : (((

AN: No, sorry, this isn't a trick chapter, but happy April fool's day nonetheless. A trick without a trick :(((

She blinks once; twice.

Her eyes open, and one second passes into two.

On reflex, she moves to sit up, and resistance is met with an undistinguishable murmur in her ear as something drags her back down.

With wide eyes, she feels a jolt of panic.

"Nnn... Homura...chan..."

She freezes, feeling hands grip her arm tighter, pulling her closer.

Gentle breaths continue, and she releases a sigh as she remembers to breathe. She rolls her head to the other side, eyes readjusting to the peek of light from the windows; not yet daybreak.

She shifts, trying to untangle herself from Madoka and her vice like grip. Stubborn fingers refuse to let go, and her legs are pinned between Madoka's.

Slight exasperation evaporates as she remains staring at the ceiling; it's warm, and Madoka lying next to her is comforting.

Her eyes slowly close, but she blinks, and her free arm moves around, patting the blankets. More shifting, and she's all but pulling Madoka up with her as she searches the bed. Amy has somehow wandered towards their legs, but Tora is nowhere to be found.

Finally, she feels the brush of soft fabric from underneath Madoka's arm. A bit of struggling, before she successfully pulls Tora out. She gently smooths down his face, fingers sliding along, stroking his head, and then moving down to his back.

She settles into her spot, lips quirking when she feels Madoka deliberately sneak her head back to rest in the crook of her arm.

Tora is pressed next to her cheek, and Amy is shared between them.

She closes her eyes.

/

It's been a few months now since Homura has moved in; long enough for them to have an established routine that Sayaka constantly teases Madoka about.

Today though, like these past few days, when they wake, things are different.

For one, Homura's not in her futon, and the room isn't as cold as it usually is before the sun rises; the seasons are changing, ever so slowly as they sleep and wake.

But, that could also be because Madoka is holding Homura tightly, and their shared body heat is trapped beneath the blankets.

The alarm continues, and Madoka groans, burying her face into Homura's shoulder.

Blinking slowly, Homura tries to nudge Madoka awake. "Madoka?"

Madoka curls her body in.

"Madoka? Your alarm..."

Another groan as Madoka rubs her face into Homura's shoulder. Her arms move, and she's suddenly springing up, eyes blinking rapidly as she tries to clear her vision.

"Madoka...? Your alarm..."

One last swipe of her eyes, before Madoka pulls away. The loss of warmth is immediate, and Homura gathers the blankets, wrapping herself in a warm cocoon.

The alarm shuts off, and she peeks out from the bundle, squinting as she sees Madoka yawning into her hand. Curiosity abated, she closes her eyes.

She's expecting the familiar sound of the bathroom door closing, but as the seconds tick by and there's only silence, she sleepily opens her eyes just as a hand is placed to her forehead.

Her eyes widen, and she presses her body into the bed in fear.

Awkward moments pass as she tries to calm herself, and finally, when she looks up again, Madoka is standing besides the bed, twisting her hands.

Their eyes meet, and Homura's the first to look away.

"S-Sorry," she mumbles, embarrassed.

"No... I'm sorry for scaring you, Homura-chan..."

She glances over, and Madoka is chewing on her lip, eyebrows furrowed in thought.

"Uhm."

Pink eyes flicker over at the sound of her voice, but she lets the silence hang, unsure how to proceed.

Their eyes meet once again, and Madoka smiles, though for some reason, Homura thinks it looks incredibly sad.

Madoka brushes her messy hair back. "How are you feeling, Homura-chan?" she asks softly.

She pauses, waiting for her body to catch up with her mind. "...Okay."

Madoka nods with that same smile on her face. She seems to be wavering on something, but her hands go behind her back instead.

"I should... uhm, go get ready..."

Her body rocks back, and Homura watches as she walks over to the bathroom. The door closes, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Her alarm rings, and she turns over in bed, eyes closing as she wraps the blankets tighter around herself.

\\

When the door opens, Madoka is startled when she sees Homura sitting up in bed, head bowed with her phone in her hands. Usually, she wakes right before the coffee is made.

She opens her mouth and falters, pressing a hand to her chest as her eyes glance away. The sight of the round bear on her dresser merely reminds her of its namesake, and she send her gaze back over, just in time for her to catch Homura lifting her head.

Those lost lavender eyes decide for her, and she takes a step forward.

With barely held restraint, she resists the temptation to glance at Homura's phone, and instead concentrates on her face.

"...Is everything alright, Homura-chan?"

The phone is flipped, screen facing down, and Homura turns away. "Mm, yeah... no updates on Satoshi's condition." Her shoulder moves in a half-hearted shrug.

Madoka nods, biting her lip as she debates to press, or to just let it go.

When lavender looks her way again, her hand is moving before she can think. Her fingers reach to absently brush against that rough, jagged line across Homura's pale cheek, and as expected, Homura flinches from her touch.

She draws in a sharp breath, "s-sorry, Homura-chan!" She quickly drops her hand.

Homura shakes her head. "No—" her eyes dart to the side. She shakes her head again. "I'm—sorry," she mumbles, shoulders slumping as her hands rest in her lap. "I'm not—" her voice cuts off, eyes closing in frustration.

Madoka wrings her hands nervously. "I'll—I'll go make breakfast..." As she turns to leave, thin fingers wrap around her arm, and she turns back in surprise.

Homura turns her head away. "I'm sorry," she murmurs. "I'm not—" she frowns, "I'm not... scared of you. I don't mean to react that way, it's just... these past few days..." She unconsciously presses her hands down, but quickly lets go when she realizes she's still holding Madoka's wrist.

Madoka smiles sadly. "I'm sorry too, Homura-chan."

Homura lifts her head, brows furrowed in light confusion.

"I'm—sorry that I never noticed how uncomfortable I made you. I just thought..." Her smile twists. "I'll—stop—uhm, hugging you and—"

Something stuck in Homura's chest tightens, and she quickly shakes her head. "N-No!"

Caught off-guard by her reaction, Madoka blinks in surprise.

Homura looks away, her breaths coming out in light gasps; she's never been one for physical affection, but the thought of more things changing—

Madoka holds out her hands, trying to calm Homura down. "It's—I'm sorry Homura-chan—"

"If it's you—I don't mind if it's you," Homura blurts out, eyes shut in embarrassment. "N-Not if it's you," she repeats softly.

Madoka stares for a moment, conflicted, because she's happy hearing Homura's words, yet sad, because of her circumstances.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura cracks one eye open.

"Can I hug you?"

The other eye opens, a hesitant glance, before she lightly dips her head.

Warm arms wrap around her, pulling her close. Her hand reaches up, and she clings to Madoka, her hands grasping and bunching the fabric of her shirt as she buries her face into Madoka's neck.

"Thank you," she whispers.

Madoka nods, hugging her tighter. Her eyes close as they prickle with unshed tears. "Any time, Homura-chan."

/

She sips at her coffee absently, noting that the day old pot tastes almost the same, and yet she feels like something is missing.

As if reading her mind, Madoka glances up from her iced coffee with a smile, "it's different, though this'll probably be really good once it starts heating up for summer."

Homura nods, and takes another sip. "I heard that there's a way to cold brew the coffee," she murmurs, eyes unfocused as she stares at the counter. "Something about letting the coffee steep overnight in the refrigerator; I'll look it up later."

Madoka hums in agreement, and their voices trail off once more into silence.

It's a comfortable atmosphere, and Homura turns to the clock, fighting back her disappointment, knowing that Madoka needs to leave soon for class.

Her mouth opens, and the words reluctantly spill from her mouth: "you should get ready to go soon, Madoka."

Madoka glances to the clock in surprise. She moves to get out of her seat, and Homura watches as she falls back into it. She tilts her head as Madoka turns to her, her hands now placed around her drink.

A nervous flicker of pink eyes, before Madoka takes a deep breath, "Homu—"

"Mado—"

They both stare at each other, until Madoka smiles, lifting her eyebrows, "I'm sorry, what were you going to say, Homura-chan?"

Homura swallows her doubts, letting it sink to the bottom of her stomach where the usual bitter words lie. "You should head to class. You missed yesterday's, and it's cutting it close to finals. I'll be fine; yesterday..." she glances away, "yesterday... helped a lot." She breathes in deeply, letting the tension drain from her body with an exhale. Her lips tug up, and she turns to Madoka with a smile. "Thank you. I would feel horrible if you failed your finals because of me. I need to catch up on work today as well, so I won't just be at home, sitting around, feeling..." she gestures with her hands.

Madoka hesitates, wanting to refuse, but knowing that Homura is right. "If... you're sure?"

Homura nods, and the smile she gives Madoka fills her with the confidence that she really will be okay.

She lets go of her drink and slides off her chair. "I'll go get dressed. You can—"

Homura shakes her head, before lifting the cup to her lips. "I'll wash the dishes since you cooked breakfast, like usual." She takes a sip, and Madoka knows better than to argue.

She sighs, though it's with pleasant annoyance, because it feels just like any other day.

"Okay, thank you, Homura-chan. Can you—"

Homura waves her away, "yes, I'll put your drink in the refrigerator for you." She quirks an eyebrow, "you're going to be late if you don't move."

Madoka sticks out her tongue. "Okay, okay." She's still smiling as she hurries to the bedroom.

Alone, and Homura lowers her cup to the counter. She glances to the window, eyes squinting at the sunlight seen through the blinds.

She lifts herself off the chair, and lowers her feet to the ground. One last sip of her coffee, and the now empty cup is gathered in her hand as she reaches for Madoka's drink.

With quiet footsteps, she makes her way into the kitchen.

\\

As she hurriedly walks down the hallway, she double checks her bag, making sure that she has her notes inside. If she doesn't leave in another minute, she's definitely going to be late, and she can already picture the disapproval on her professor's face as she slinks into the classroom.

She knows this, but—

She stops in front of the breakfast bar, "Homura-chan, I'm leaving now."

Homura glances over her shoulder, her hands covered in soap suds, sleeves rolled to her elbows. "Have a safe trip, Madoka."

Madoka is glad that Homura is looking away when a happy smile blooms across her face. "I'll be home by evening; I'm probably going to drop by the professor's office and ask a few questions..."

Homura nods, still concentrated on the dishes. "I'll be back a bit later as well; tutoring tonight. You should get going."

Madoka glances at the clock, "eep! Okay, I'll see you later tonight." She moves to walk away, but stops. "If you need anything—"

"Don't hesitate to call you?" Homura finishes for her, tilting her head back with a smile.

Madoka smiles in response, "yes." Her smile falters. "Be careful waking back, okay?"

"I will; you're going to be late." Homura glances her way, "be careful, too."

Madoka bobs her head, trying to fight back the inappropriate smile. "Right! I'll, uhm, see you later, Homura-chan!"

"Have a safe trip, Madoka," Homura repeats once more, listening as hurried steps rush away.

Her face softens, and she returns to the dishes.

/

She leans back against the counter, hands pulling, and unrolling her sleeves as the dishes sit on the rack, drying.

Coffee, breakfast, and then the dishes. Done, done, and done.

She glances to the clock: another half hour.

She brushes her jacket down, before pushing away from the counter.

Enough time for some light studying.

\\

She's jotting down notes when her phone chimes, signalling the time.

With a slow exhale, she leaves her pencil on her notebook and reaches for the plastic container.

Numerous crinkles and shakes of flimsy plastic later, a handful of pills sits in her hands.

One by one, she slowly pops them into her mouth, each with a sip of water to wash them down. The last pill is swallowed, followed by another refill of water. She sets the cup on the counter, her stomach now full, and filled with a concoction of medications that are meant to keep her alive.

She pushes the glass away, her arm now resting over her notebook as she lowers her head.

She's not sleepy, but she feels so tired.

A sharp beep stirs her from an unsettling dream, and she sits up as her heart hammers in her chest.

She glances around, listening, and slowly relaxes when she realizes the apartment is empty. A quick check to her phone, and there's a message from Madoka.

She skims the contents: nothing important, but comforting all the same. Her reply is short, though she attaches a small sticker of a cat on a whim.

Madoka's response returns with a tiger and a bear, and it's a small relay as they try and tack on as many as possible in their messages; nothing important as Madoka waits for her next class to start, but the weight against her shoulders feel lighter, and she's cracking a few smiles at their exchange.

Ten minutes fly by, until Madoka tells her that the lecture is starting. She sends her response, and thinking that's that, she places her phone down.

Another beep, and she tilts her head as she picks up the device.

She stares blankly at the new message, feeling the spike in emotions as her mood lifts just from Madoka's words.

Her fingers hover over the keys as she hesitates to send her reply. She glances to the side, one hand pressed to her warm face as it's sent.

Her head is lowered back to the counter, and when the minutes pass without a response, she sighs in relief, knowing that Madoka is most likely in class.

She scrolls through her phone, her eyes once again landing on the most recent message. A small smile, before she closes her eyes, phone still held in her hands.

\\

Despite the warmer temperatures as the sun continues to rise, like always, she's dressed to keep her body covered as much as possible; she's pale enough as it is, and getting sunburnt would open up a new set of problems that she really, really wants to avoid.

She knows in a few weeks, she'll be bringing out her umbrella as an extra precaution.

The door knob is twisted, and she tests it a few times, making sure it's locked, before she readjusts her bag, and steps away.

Past the mail room, and into the streets.

She keeps a brisk pace, keeping her eyes forward and her thoughts blank.

By the time she arrives on campus, her sweater feels too warm, and she pulls at her collar, trying to guide air through the opening.

Squinting, she quickly makes her way to her first class, wanting to be out of the sun as soon as possible.

The inside is cool as the AC blasts cold air, and as she settles in her seat a few minutes later, her body temperature has lowered, and she knows that halfway through the lecture, she'll feel a chill instead.

A few students nearby mill about, discussing their plans for summer break as they wait for class to begin.

She takes out her notes, ignoring the few curious glances thrown her way; some of them had a staring problem, but she squares her shoulders, fingers flipping open her book as she pushes them from her mind.

When a hush settles into the room as her professor enters, she sets her notes aside for a different notebook.

With the professor's voice droning in her ear, her thoughts are focused on his lecture, and nothing else.

\\

She purchases a few onigiri from the canteen, and stands in one of the shaded areas outdoor as she eats.

A check to her phone, and when she sees the notification from Madoka, she pauses, before unlocking the screen. A quick skim, and she smiles before she can stop herself. A nervous glance around, and she takes a bite of her food to keep her mouth occupied.

She sends her response, adding a different, yet similar sticker at the end. Her finger hovers briefly, but her eyes flicker over, spotting the time, and she quickly presses the button without another thought. Her phone is slipped back into her bag, and after a mouthful of water, she heads into the building, entering the classroom just as her professor is about to close the door.

Eyes are on her as she walks to an empty seat, but like always, she ignores them. She absently brushes her hair back as she sits down, hands moving to her side bag to pull out her notebook.

/

The sun is lower in the sky when her classes are over, and there's a curtain of mugginess that hangs in the air. Summer is approaching quickly, and she can already feel traces of the humidity that will make her clothes stick to her skin.

It's not something she looks forward to.

With one hand securely on her side bag, she exits the campus, making her way to the closest bus stop. A quick check to her phone, and another message sent, before she idly waits for the bus to arrive.

She hears another beep, and thinking it's Madoka, she unlocks her phone without looking.

It's a different number, and as she skims the message, she blinks in surprise.

Normally, she would feel annoyed at the last minute change in her schedule, but today, she doesn't exactly mind. Just as she sends out her response, she notices a

few people step forward towards the curb. She glances down the street, and sure enough, the familiar bus rumbles closer. She can see the bus number, and the bright electronic sign that continuously scrolls its pre-determined destinations.

She checks the time again, before slipping the phone back into her bag.

She's still deciding when the bus pulls in front of the bus stop, and when it's her turn to board, someone behind her clears their throat, and she finally takes a hesitant step towards the stairs.

Her hands dig through her pockets for her bus pass, and she slides it across the scanner as she walks by the driver.

She searches for a seat, finding an empty one in the middle, and quickly heads towards it.

\\

It's an unplanned trip, and she shuffles out of the bus, following most of passengers as they head to their destination.

The streets are packed with daily commuters, and as the crowds continue in one direction, she slows down to a halt, stepping aside to let people pass.

She grips the strap of her bag tightly as she's hit with a wave of nostalgia.

Daylight, and the sights are familiar.

How many years has it been?

She moves slowly, eyes glancing around; there's no warning tape wrapped along like how she thought there would be; no signs of a deadly struggle. She steps closer to peer through the tinted doors.

It's dark inside; sign flipped closed.

One last look as she walks away.

/

The way towards the service road still fills her with unease; it's an empty alley, and she can hear the clicks of her boot heels echoing with every step she takes.

The faces of the buildings here are dilapidated; the road she walks on is cracked and uneven, and the doors she passes are plain, paint chipped and scuffed with dirt.

Finally, she spots the sign she's looking for, and heads towards it.

Her hand slips into her bag, and she approaches the door with a small ring of keys.

Two tries, and she's surprised when it successfully unlocks. She pushes open the door, and a familiar smell of herbs and spices hits her straight on; she falters, almost dropping the keys, but barely manages to catch them before they fall from her hands.

She sucks in a few shaky breaths as she counts to ten. A small push off, and she continues inside, hand automatically moving to the switch located by the entrance.

The lights flicker twice until they catch, and she squints as white light floods into the room.

She steps forward, head turning as her eyes rove around. The inside is almost the same as she remembers, though some things are newer, and some things have been moved around.

The door swings shut behind her, and she jumps as she hears the automatic lock click into place. She shakes her head, sighing in annoyance at her reaction. The irritation slowly fades as her eyes settle in front of the stove, where a familiar figure used to always stand, before—

She turns away, head bowed almost in shame as she walks further in.

Through the doorway, she ignores the light switch and stops in front of the bar counter; her hand slides along the metal surface, eyes closing as the memories pass.

'*What did I tell you about entering the bar area, Homura? Not until you're old enough*!'

She can hear his angry voice in her ears, and she smiles sadly, before the voice disappears, and only an empty pang in her chest remains.

She slumps forward, fingers gripping the counter, pressed against it for support.

A shallow inhale of air, before she sighs.

\\

She sits up abruptly, one knee knocking into the counter as she wakes to the sound of the door closing.

She cringes, her hand moving to rub the pain away as she concentrates on the doorway that leads to the kitchen. More clanging, and she glances around for the closest weapon. The area is empty, and she's still debating whether or not to use the stool she's sitting on when a familiar figure appears from the kitchen with a metal ladle in his hand.

He blinks, and she blinks back.

He squints his eyes, pushing his hair back in exasperation.

"If you're going to drop by, at least turn on the lights, huh?" he grumbles as he flicks the light on.

Her eyes close from the brightness, and when she opens them again, he is in front of the bar counter, and the ladle is now set aside.

"I was about to bash you with this," he says, and as emphasis, he picks it up again to wave it around menacingly. "Thought another robber had come in or something..."

She blinks.

He sighs, hands resting along the counter as he eyes her. "...What are you doing here?"

His usual demeanor eases a bit of the tension, and she brushes her hair back absently. "Am I not allowed here?"

He sighs again. "That's not what I meant."

She pulls out her phone, and frowns when she realizes she had slept for almost an hour.

"Homura."

She turns back, and with a start, she realizes that the sides of his hair are graying, and the lines under his eyes are more pronounced and deeper.

She wonders then, when did he get so old?

He clears his throat, and her eyesight drifts down to the counter.

"...I was in the neighbourhood. Thought I'd stop by."

Silence, and she glances up to see him pushing away from the bar. "We're still closed for today, but I plan to open tomorrow; everything happened outside, so we

were allowed to open again pretty quickly." He shrugs, and his hands slip into his pockets out of habit. "I'll need to hire someone new, until Satoshi can come back."

His name spikes her pulse, and she looks away. "I see."

"...Where's your friend?"

She blinks, turning to stare at him. "What?"

He raises his eyebrow, but her gaze in unwavering.

He relents with another exasperated sigh. "The girl," he gestures to the side of his head, miming something, "pink."

"Oh."

"You didn't come with her?"

She tilts her head. "No, why would I have?"

To her surprise, his lips twitch up as he rubs his chin with his hand. "I see some things haven't changed much, though I don't blame you." He shakes his head. "Since you're here, help me take inventory. I'll make you dinner once we're done."

Without waiting for her to respond, he turns around, heading to the kitchen.

Her eyes flicker to her phone.

She sighs, and follows after.

\\

It's just as boring as she remembers it to be, and she stifles a yawn as he rattles off the supplies he'll need to restock.

Finally, he steps back from the cupboards. "And that's about it."

She stifles another yawn, and without missing a beat, he reaches forward to ruffle her hair.

She slaps his hand away, and he chuckles at her annoyed expression.

"Just like old times, eh, Homura?"

She averts her eyes, her hands moving to fix her hair.

His eyes narrow, but he sighs, and stretches out his back, popping a few joints. "Alright, for helping me, I'll make some omurice; how does that sound?"

He hears a sharp intake of breath, and looks over to see Homura pulling the strap of her side bag over her head.

"You don't need to cook me anything. I'm going home."

He reaches out to snag her wrist, but she whirls on him with angry eyes.

They both stare at each other, and eventually, he relaxes his posture.

"You can't keep running, Homura."

Her eyes dart away, hands bunching into fists, nails digging into her palm.

He sighs, and his touch is gentle as he drops his hand on top of her head. "You don't have to eat here, but I'll cook you dinner. You live with your friend, right? She's never had the infamous 'Homurice,' but I have a feeling she'll like it."

Before she can slap his hand off, he's already walking away. "Grab the eggs, and I'll get started on the rice."

She opens her mouth, but he waves a hand in her general direction, not even bothering to look at her.

"As thanks, to your friend."

She frowns. "For what?"

He whistles, ignoring her question as he snaps his fingers. "The eggs, Homura."

She makes an annoyed sound, but nonetheless, turns to the refrigerator.

/

She's lost in her thoughts, hit with a familiar smell that makes her stomach rumble, and the hole in her heart ache.

She watches as smoke rises; hears the pan sizzle as the eggs heat.

A shaky hand is pressed to her leg as she forces the memories back. She regrets visiting, but she can't seem to bring herself to leave, at least not yet.

A flick of his wrist, and the flat omelette slides off the pan, into the waiting container filled with rice on the counter. He reaches for the ketchup bottle, but stops, and turns to her.

"You want to write it?"

She glances away.

"I'm going to write it then..." his voice trails off, and he's still holding the bottle in his hands when she glances up, frowning in annoyance.

"...You're going to write something idiotic, aren't you." Her voice is accusing, and he grins in response.

"What makes you say that?"

She reluctantly ambles forward, snagging the ketchup from him once she's close enough. Her lines are neat as she squeezes the ketchup on top.

He tilts his head in disappointment. "You're not going to make a heart?"

She doesn't react, still concentrated on her task. She doesn't notice him stepping closer, nor his hands reaching for the bottle until-

"Hey!" She stumbles as he lightly hip checks her, and one of the lines goes crooked as he snatches the bottle back into his hands.

"'Homurice' isn't complete without this," he explains, expertly making the pattern around her lines. "Otherwise it'd just be any other normal omurice."

She moves for the bottle, but he lifts an eyebrow as he holds his arm high into the air.

"You couldn't reach back then, and you still can't reach now."

She grits her teeth in frustration, and he smirks, moving to finish the design.

"I'll give you a ride back, so try not to jostle it around too much."

She sighs. "You're—still the same, too."

He nods.

"...Though, maybe you're going a bit bald."

His head snaps up. "...Himeko said the same thing." He nervously glances to the side. "It's not that noticeable, is it? I was thinking about going to the doctor to get a prescription or something..."

She blinks. "...Just finish the heart already, baldy."

"Yeah, yeah, you little brat."

\\

The car ride this time feels lighter, and there's small talk shared in between them as Keiichi drives her home.

"...I'm surprised you never changed the locks," she murmurs, eyes staring out the window, chin resting on her hand as she leans against the door frame. "Maybe you were asking to get robbed."

He switches the station, and low music plays through one speaker. "Nah, there's nothing really valuable there; only ghosts."

She breathes in, regretting it when the musky smell hits the back of her throat. She cracks open the window, listening as the air rushes inside.

"Plus," he continues, his eyes flickering over briefly, "Sensei promised you a safe place." He smiles to himself, "well, as safe as it could be."

She remains quiet, the static from the air filling her silence instead.

He hits the turn signal, and steers the car into the corner lane, stopping at the light as they wait for it to change.

"You know, Himeko asks about you sometimes."

She leans back against her seat, not replying.

"She's worried that the next time we hear about you, you'll be dead or something."

The bag rustles as she shifts her legs. "That's okay, I have enough money to cover part of my funeral—"

He slams his hand into the steering wheel, and she jumps.

He shakes his head in frustration. "Sorry—I'm not mad at you." He glances over, sighing. "I'll make you another one later; I'll make you as many as you want," he says, correcting himself. "You should bring her over, your friend. To the restaurant."

She shrugs, facing away from him as she tries to calm her heartbeat.

"She's—good; she seems good."

Her eyes close as she leans against the seat once more. "Yes," she says softly.

He doesn't hear her as her voice is carried away by the wind, but another glance, before he once more faces the road.

/

She slams the door closed, and he gives her a small nod as his car putters away.

She watches until it reaches the corner, lights blinking in the distance as he signals to the right.

A soft sigh, and she takes a moment, before moving to the apartment.

When she opens the door, the lights are on, and the aroma of rice and and a delicious mixture of spices wafts through the air. She closes the door, locking it behind her. After her boots are off and neatly set aside, she walks towards the kitchen.

Closer, and she can hear music playing as a soft voice hums along.

She sets her bags down on the counter, watching as Madoka tends to the stove, body swaying lightly to the beat. She holds a spatula in her hand, and Homura tilts her head when Madoka brings it close to her lips, spoon side up. Her humming flows into lyrics, and she's turning around, singing into her makeshift mic.

She freezes when she sees Homura, and the spatula slips from her hands.

"H-Homura-chan!" Her cheeks flush pink. "I—didn't hear you come home."

Homura smiles, coughing into her hand as she tries to hide her laugh. "Don't mind me, Madoka, you looked like you were having fun."

Madoka puffs out her cheeks, crouching to pick up the fallen spatula. "I bet you didn't even call out when you came back," she whines as she stands to head to the sink.

Homura turns away, "ah..."

Madoka twists the faucet on, letting the water run over the spatula. She glances up, noticing the plastic bag on the breakfast bar as Homura nervously fidgets with the plastic ends.

The sink shuts off, and the music continues to play in the background.

"Welcome back, Homura-chan."

Homura nods slowly, eyes once more staring absently to the side. "I'm, uhm, back," she says softly.

Madoka lightly flicks the water off the spatula as her other hand reaches for a nearby kitchen towel to wipe it dry. "You're back earlier today?" she glances to the clock; normally, Homura would return closer to when she's finished cooking.

Homura reaches behind her, dragging her hands through her hair. "My session was rescheduled to Thursday."

Madoka brims with curiosity, eyes now staring at the plastic bag as if it held all of Homura's secrets.

"I—" Homura sighs, and starts pulling the bag open, revealing the container inside.

Madoka recognizes it immediately, head turning to the refrigerator that still holds a bit of leftover curry. She turns back to Homura who's slowly opening the lid.

"I brought back some food," Homura says, pushing the container closer to give Madoka a clearer look.

She peers into it, noting the smeared globs of ketchup on top of a golden yellow. "Omurice?"

Homura nods, ignoring the twinge in her chest. "Yes. Keiichi-san made it. It's... still warm."

Madoka stares for a second longer, before she lifts her eyes and gives Homura a smile. "We should eat it then." She turns to the stove, moving to lower the heat to a light simmer.

"I'll get the dishes," Homura murmurs as she makes her way around the counter.

Madoka stirs the food around one last time. "Dinner will be ready in half an hour."

She hears the clatter of the plates as Homura pulls them down, and once she leaves the spatula on a nearby dish, she moves to the drawers for the utensils.

Two chopsticks and a spoon later, she's handed a plate with a small portion of omurice on top.

"Thank you, Homura-chan," she says, accepting it. She waits until Homura has her own plate filled, before she brings her chopsticks up. "Itadakimasu."

The first bite, and her eyes widen as the taste hits her tongue. It's sweeter than normal omurice, with a numerous amount of vegetables mixed inside: carrots, red bell peppers, onions, along with some mushrooms.

She covers her mouth with her hand, swallowing her bite. "This is really good, Homura-chan. You said Keiichi-san made it...?"

Homura nods, mouth full.

"Do you think I could have the recipe? It tastes like..." she takes another bite, "the sauce is sweet, but the stock with the rice is really flavourful. Does he make it in house?"

Noticing Madoka's plate is empty, Homura scoops her some more.

"Thank you, Homura-chan."

Homura fills her plate again. "...I'll ask for it the next time I see him, but there's no guarantee he'll give it to me. The sauce though, is sweet..." she glances down, "because there's chocolate in it..."

Madoka blinks. "Chocolate?"

"Yes."

"That's—an interesting ingredient to add."

Homura nods again, eating slowly.

Madoka finishes her portion, and shakes her head when Homura offers to add more to her plate. "I'll save some room for dinner; you can eat the rest, Homura-chan." She smiles, watching as Homura shovels another spoonful into her mouth; she looks like she's enjoying it.

Madoka licks her lips, tasting a bit of the mentioned chocolate.

Homura sets her plate down with a light clatter, and Madoka sees there's still a good third of the omurice left.

"You're not going to finish it?"

"Tomorrow; there's still dinner to eat."

She doesn't want to read too much into it, but—

She smiles, moving to return to the stove as Homura packs the food away.

/

She touches the back of neck, sliding her hand up through her hair, testing to see if it's mostly dry.

A light clatter, and she drops her hand when she sees Homura is done with her water. She stands, waiting as Homura moves to place the cup into the sink. Once done, she follows her as they walk back to the bedroom.

She bites her lip, eyes flickering over to Homura, before glancing away.

Awkward tension hangs in the air as they step inside the room; as Madoka fights her disappointment when she sees Homura heading to the closet for her futon. She watches as she stops in front of the doors, but blinks when Homura merely stands there, unmoving.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura hesitantly turns around. Their eyes meet briefly, until Homura quickly looks away. Madoka watches as her mouth opens, and then closes shut without a word spoken.

Concerned, Madoka frowns lightly. "Homu—"

"Mado—"

Homura looks up, gesturing for Madoka to continue.

She pauses. "Oh, uhm... is everything alright? Did—something happen today?"

Homura absently fiddles with her pajama shirt, eyes averted. When she finally turns to her again, there's a tinge of pink on her cheeks.

Homura coughs into her hand. "Uhm," she lowers her head, mumbling something that Madoka has trouble hearing.

Madoka steps forward, "Homura-chan?"

Everything comes out in a rush of air: "canIsleepwithyoutonight?"

Madoka face twists, first from confusion, to amusement. "Can you say that a bit slower, Homura-chan?"

Homura drops her head, "can—" she clamps her mouth shut, shaking her head in frustration. "Nothing. Uhm, we should head to bed." She turns around, and with shaky hands, she moves to slide the closet door open.

She's clumsy as she pulls her futon out, and it unravels in her hands, half the ends spilling down to the floor.

"Homura-chan?"

She's turning when Madoka calls out to her, and the unexpected voice besides her ear catches her off-guard. She jumps, taking an involuntary step to the side, and her foot snags on the fallen blankets. She trips, and Madoka quickly reaches out to catch her. Hands around a thin arm, an overestimation of weight, and underestimation of strength later, and the breath is knocked from them as they crash to the floor.

Madoka lays there for a moment, dazed. The futon is cool against her skin, and she feels someone-Homura-scramble off her, and light fills her vision when the heavy blankets are pulled away.

"I'm sorry, Madoka. Are you okay?" Homura crouches, hands patting Madoka down, checking her for injuries.

Madoka looks up, and when she sees the crooked glasses on Homura's face, the tension changes, and she feels a laugh bubble up from within.

Homura blinks, her face now confused. Madoka laughs harder, holding her stomach.

"H-Homura-chan—" another fit of laughter, and Homura leans back against her haunches, worried that Madoka had hit her head.

She glances around for her phone, but she hears the giggles taper off, and turns to face her.

"Are you okay, Madoka? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

Madoka shakes her head, smiling as she sits up. "I'm fine, Homura-chan." She stares into nervous lavender, and makes sure her movements are large enough for Homura to see her hand moving to touch her. She tentatively places a hand over hers, and there's relief when Homura doesn't flinch back. "Are you okay, Homura-chan? What were you trying to ask me?"

"Oh." Homura glances away. "It—was nothing important," she mumbles. "I-If you're okay, then—"

Madoka presses her hand down, and Homura turns to face her again. "Homura-chan."

They lock eyes, but once again, Homura is the first to look away.

Madoka reaches forward just as Homura turns back. She freezes when Madoka fixes her glasses into place. There's a gentle smile, and a light brush against her bangs, before Madoka sits back.

"Now, what were you going to ask me, Homura-chan?"

Her mouth is dry, and she swallows nervously. "...Would it, I mean, you don't have to—but... would..."

Madoka waits patiently, nodding in encouragement.

"...Can I sleep with you again tonight?"

Madoka blinks, and Homura quickly tries to retract her question.

"Uhm, I mean, no, n-nevermind—"

"Sure, Homura-chan."

Her fumbling stops, and they stare at each other for a few seconds, before this time, Madoka looks away. She turns her head, not wanting to show Homura her flushed face as she tries to fight back her smile.

"Let's—go to sleep, Homura-chan."

A small inhale, "okay..."

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Homura is already asleep when she finally feels her own eyes closing. Just as she's about to drift off, she hears Homura murmur something, and feels her toss around.

"Homura-chan?"

No reply.

Seconds pass, before there's another murmur, and another flail of her arm. Madoka sits up, waiting for her eyes to readjust until she can see the outline of Homura's body.

"Homura-chan?" She frowns, wondering if Homura knew this would happen, and wondering if it's related to whatever had happened today.

Homura turns around again, and Madoka tentatively reaches for her, slipping her arms around her to hug her tightly. Homura pushes back, but she holds on until Homura relaxes in her arms.

She mumbles something, and Madoka gently strokes her head, trying to calm her down.

Homura sighs softly, and settles back into a quiet sleep.

Madoka hesitates, before she moves closer, pressing her lips to the top of Homura's forehead.

"Goodnight, Homura-chan."

Her eyes close, but it takes a while longer until she can fall aslee**p**.

AN: the chapters are getting longer... But updates are slower zzz

To whoever is still following this story, thanks for reading. writing is zzz and I am zzz and updates are zzzz.

To some people: \\o.o/

She doesn't dream often, and usually when she does, most of them fade as her consciousness wakes, already forgotten as her eyes flutter open to greet the morning sun.

She doesn't dream often, but sometimes she still does.

A familiar face that haunts her, one that makes her remember. That makes her wake with a crushing weight against her chest—a different pain that she tries her best to forget.

With a small gasp, she opens her eyes. She blinks in confusion, and the tears slowly trail down.

Her hand moves to wipe them away, but—

She turns her head.

A moment, until her eyes finally readjust, and she recognizes the head of messy hair. She hesitates, before she turns over.

She can feel the warmth radiating off from her sleeping figure. She slowly brings a shaky hand forward, fingers gentle as they rest on Madoka's shoulder.

Her steady breaths, the slow rise and fall of her chest.

She curls her body in closer—close, and almost touching.

Her eyes close, but she knows it'll take a while for her to fall back asleep. Her hands move again, this time in search of fabric and plush. Eventually, she finds what she's looking for. She presses Tora-kun against her cheek, holding him tightly in her hands.

She blinks, eyes opening once more to darkness when she feels Madoka shift. Arms and legs snake around her, entangling her in their grasp.

She doesn't try to pull away. She merely closes her eyes, letting herself get lost in this feeling instead.

/

She's packing her backpack, though she's sure she feels a lingering stare on her back. She turns, and sure enough, Homura is watching her.

Or—at least her head is turned to her direction.

Whether or not she's looking is another story.

She finishes stuffing her last notebook inside, and leaves her book bag on the floor as she walks over. The bed dips, and a distant gaze finally focuses on her. Tora-kun and Amy are both cradled in her hands, pressed against her face.

Madoka smiles, somehow resisting the temptation to brush Homura's bangs back. "Morning, Homura-chan."

"Mm... morning." Homura blinks heavily, eyes closing longer than needed.

"You can go back to sleep."

"I could," Homura murmurs. Her eyes stubbornly open.

Madoka regards her for a few seconds. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine," Homura mumbles.

The temptation is stronger now, and her hand is moving before she can stop herself.

Homura blinks at her touch—but Madoka smiles again because her reaction is different than yesterday's.

"You should go back to sleep," Madoka says softly as her fingers push Homura's bangs to the side.

She searches for signs of sickness: no fever, and her pallor is pale, but not unusually so.

Her hand lingers a moment longer, until she reluctantly moves away. Unsupported, Homura's bangs fall back into place, and a few strands cover her eyes.

"We're supposed to meet with Mami-san today," Madoka murmurs absently. She looks up, towards the clock: she needs to leave soon.

Homura hums, and Madoka turns back in time to see her eyes closing.

"...You don't have to come if you don't want to."

Her shoulder shifts. "It's fine."

Madoka opens her mouth, but her words stop when she finds lavender now staring at her.

"You're going to be late."

She sighs. "Alright, alright. I'll get going now. I'll be back around noon—I'll see you then."

"Have a nice day, Madoka."

She pushes off the bed.

Homura closes her eyes, but opens them again when the bed dips down.

"Call me, okay?" Madoka tells her, voice soft. "If, for whatever reason... I'll pick up."

They stare at one another, until Homura looks away. "...Thank you."

"Of course, Homura-chan. I'll see you later."

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Finished with her breakfast, she loads the sink to start on the dishes. Once done, she takes a seat by the breakfast bar, sitting so that she faces the window.

She stares out, already knowing the weather outside is warm; her sleeves are rolled, and her jacket is unzipped, revealing the thin shirt she wears underneath. Most likely in another week, she'll abandon her jacket altogether.

Her thoughts wander, and she's startled by the light buzz from her alarm clock, signalling the time.

After a glass of water and a handful of pills, she moves to the couch to take a seat. She feels sluggish today. She makes herself comfortable, and closes her eyes.

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She sits up slowly, blinking the sleep away.

"Sorry, did I wake you?"

She looks up, finding Madoka by the doorway, in the middle of slipping off her shoes.

She blinks again. "...What time is it?"

Madoka walks over, eyeing her sleepy appearance. "A little before noon. I was worried when you didn't reply, so I left a bit earlier. How are you?"

She lifts her glasses to rub her eyes. "Mm... Sorry, I fell asleep and didn't hear your message."

She freezes when she feels a hand on her forehead. She looks up, and Madoka is leaning close, her own hand against her forehead to compare their temperatures.

"Doesn't feel like a fever," Madoka murmurs. She pulls away, still frowning. "Maybe you shouldn't go to lunch today."

Her glasses are returned to her face. "...I'm fine."

"Homura-chan—"

Homura grabs her hand, cutting off her protests. "Thank you. I'm fine, though—" she debates a simple lie, but knows the truth will carry more weight, "...I did have a bit of trouble sleeping last night, but the nap I took earlier helped."

When Madoka continues to stare, Homura smiles lightly and squeezes her hand.

"Really... Thank you for worrying about me. Welcome back."

Finally, Madoka pulls away and Homura retracts her hand. She watches as Madoka steps around her to drop heavily onto the sofa; she looks tired.

"How was class?" Homura asks after a moment.

Eyes cut to her direction, before Madoka glances away. "Mm..."

Homura nudges her side.

"There's a few sections I'm worried about..."

"I can try and help you, if you'd like?"

Without responding, Madoka leans over to rest her head on Homura's shoulder. She feels her stiffen, but takes it as a good sign when she doesn't move away.

Madoka closes her eyes. "Homura-chan?"

Homura slowly wills herself to relax. "Yes, Madoka?"

"...Why couldn't it be summer vacation already?"

She hears a small laugh, feels the light shake of Homura's body. Her eyes open to see Homura smiling.

"If only we could fast forward the things we didn't like..." Her voice trails off, and her smile slowly disappears.

Madoka turns, snuggling closer despite the warm weather. "We still have a bit of time before we have to leave... wake me in thirty minutes?"

Homura hums. She looks around, searching. "My phone's in the kitchen. I'll set the alarm." She moves to stand, but Madoka grips her arm tightly, refusing to let go.

"Here's my phone, Homura-chan."

Homura blinks, but Madoka's phone is suddenly in her lap, and the closed eyes tell her she's not supposed to argue.

She fumbles through the unlocking process, not used to the controls, and finally finds the alarm application after a few unsuccessful swipes. Once set, she places the phone down by her side.

She leans back against the cushions, letting the quiet of their apartment wash over her.

It's warm, and Madoka's breath against her neck tickles her skin. One more attempt to break away is foiled when Madoka grips her arm tighter with a grumble under her breath.

She sighs. She gives up, and shifts to make herself more comfortable.

She closes her eyes.

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She squints at the afternoon sun, feeling the heat in the air. Her jacket, as always, is too warm, but she ignores it. Though, she glances to her side, to where Madoka stands, to their linked arms.

The heat isn't too unpleasant; not to mention, sometimes she finds it easier to just follow along.

They continue their walk in companionable silence, and she relaxes, slowing her usual pace a little so that Madoka doesn't have to struggle to keep up.

Madoka tugs her arm, causing her to glance over.

"I'll start looking up places we can go to, Homura-chan."

Homura tilts her head, but then the words click: their planned trip.

"Anywhere's fine," she responds as she faces forward once more.

"Oh, I also forgot to mention this..."

Curious, Homura's eyes flicker over. "Mention what?"

Madoka bites her lip. "Mama wanted to know if you were going to visit..."

Her footsteps slow, before returning to normal. "Ah..." She turns away.

"My parents really like you, Homura-chan."

"Mm..."

Madoka tugs her arm again, "it wouldn't be for that long; I only have a week break, and then summer school starts after..."

"A week..."

"Your job at the computer lab doesn't start until then too. You said you liked Mitakihara, didn't you?"

Homura smiles, hearing the whine in Madoka's voice. "You're like a little kid."

Madoka puffs out her cheeks, and this time, Homura laughs at her expression.

Her pout turns into a grin, and she grabs for Homura's hand. She swings it forward as they continue down the street.

"We could go to Mitakihara, then go to our trip from there. Think about it?" she asks softly, glancing over.

Homura sighs, eyes closing briefly in slight exasperation. "I'll think it over."

Madoka squeezes her hand. "Thank you."

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The overhead chime sounds as Homura pulls open the glass door. She holds out a hand, indicating for Madoka to enter first, and then lets the door swing close to follow her to the front counter.

"We're, uhm, meeting some friends here?" Madoka explains to the waitress.

"Do you know where they're seated?"

Madoka shakes her head, and turns to look into the cafe, hoping to spot a familiar head of blonde hair sitting at one of the tables.

She stops when there's a light touch on her back.

"I see them," Homura tells her, leaning closely as she nods over to the window seats.

"Ah," Madoka blushes, and turns to the waitress. "We found them, so we'll just head on over there...?"

The waitress nods with a smile. "Go on ahead, I'll be by shortly to take your orders."

"Thank you," Madoka murmurs, dipping her head lightly, before she follows Homura over to where Mami and Kyouko are sitting.

As they approach, Mami glances up, and an excited smile lights up her face.

Homura eyes her warily, but Madoka gently nudges her forward and she reluctantly clears the remaining distance to their table.

"Kaname-san, Akemi-san." Mami's smile has yet to fade as she greets them.

"Yo." Without looking up from her menu, Kyouko raises her hand.

"Mami-san, Kyouko-chan. Sorry, were you waiting long?" Madoka looks apologetic.

Mami shakes her head. "No, not at all! We just arrived shortly ourselves." She gestures to the empty seats across, "please, have a seat."

Homura gives a small nod of acknowledgement, before she slides into the booth.

There's plenty of space, but she glances to Madoka in slight confusion when she sidles right up besides her.

Before she can say anything, Kyouko slides two menus over, and taps the plastic material. "Here you go, lovebirds," she ignores Homura's blank look, "I'm gonna order soon, so pick and choose something quickly."

Mami frowns. "Kyouko—they just arrived. There's no rush. You can order first, if you want."

"That's not what you said earlier! But—" Kyouko's arm shoots up as she turns to flag down their waitress.

Mami ignores her, turning back to face Madoka and Homura with her ever present smile. "How are you two today? It's starting to warm up, isn't it?"

Madoka nods in agreement and matches Mami's smile. "It's definitely the start of summer. I'm fine, how are you, Mami-san?"

"I'm doing well, Kaname-san. Thank you for asking."

Homura places a menu in front of Madoka, earning her a smile, and a murmured thank you, before Madoka turns back to Mami.

They continue their small talk, and Homura tunes them out as she browses the menu.

It's their first time here, and she's already comparing the prices to the cafe they normally visit. It's more expensive, and half the dishes have a mix of Italian names, as if they're trying to upscale the selection, giving more validation to their prices somehow.

The waitress arrives with a tablet in hand, ready to take their orders.

Kyouko leans over Mami, bringing her menu closer for the waitress to see. "I'll take this one," she points, and then slides her finger down, "and this one." She quickly flips the page, and points to another item. "And this, plus this. Cola, oh, and I'll keep my menu just in case I want to order anything extra."

Mami calmly pushes Kyouko back to her seat as the waitress turns to her direction. "I'll take the lunch set: grilled prosciutto and tomato soup, with a cafe latte."

The waitress punches her order in. She turns to Madoka, "and for you?"

Slightly panicking, Madoka quickly skims the menu. "Uhm... that is..."

"We still need a few minutes," Homura cuts in.

The waitress pauses, but when Madoka nods in agreement, she bows lightly. "Please take your time." She takes Mami's menu, before walking away to deal with a different table.

Madoka turns to Homura in gratitude. "Thanks, Homura-chan."

"It's fine... Did you want to split something...?" Homura brings her menu closer to Madoka, showing her one of the dishes. "I'm not that hungry."

Madoka glances to her, brow slightly furrowing.

Feeling her stare, Homura lifts her head, blinking. "...You don't have to split if you don't want to."

"You're not hungry?" Madoka merely asks, turning to face her. She lowers her voice, "it's not because of your medicine, is it?"

"You know," they both turn to Kyouko, who has an eyebrow raised, "as fun as it is watching you two flirt—actually, no, no it isn't."

Underneath the table, Mami pinches Kyouko's leg.

"Ow!" Kyouko glares at the blonde, but Mami levels her with an unwavering look. Kyouko relents, turning her head to mutter something under her breath.

"Sorry, you two can continue choosing your order," Mami tells them with a smile, "don't mind us."

"Ah," Madoka smiles in return. "Sorry—" she's already moving to face Homura who is once again browsing the menu. "Homura-chan?"

She sighs softly. "I had the rest of the Ho—uhm, omurice for breakfast. It was filling."

Madoka wonders briefly about the correction, but Homura has her eyes glued to the menu, obviously trying to pretend it hadn't happened.

"Madoka?"

"Hm...?"

Lavendar flickers her way. "Did you want to share a dish...?"

This time, it's Madoka's turn to sigh. "Yes, that's fine."

"I'll split with you, Sunshine, if you want," Kyouko interrupts with a grin.

Homura flips through the menu, eyes skimming the drink selection. "If by 'split,' you mean eating most of the food and then having me foot the bill, no thank you," she answers Kyouko, voice dry.

Kyouko adopts a hurt expression. "Ouch, you'd think I'd do something like that?"

"Yes."

Mami tries to disguise her laugh as a cough, but fails. "Ahem, let them choose in peace, Kyouko."

"Whatever, I'm only here for the food anyways." Kyouko holds out her hand to Mami. "Lend me your phone."

"I always tell you you should get one," Mami replies even as she reaches for her purse.

"Yeah, yeah."

Frowning, Mami drops the phone into her waiting hand. Kyouko falls into silence, and Mami spends a moment looking around the cafe.

When the waitress stops by with their drinks, Madoka and Homura finally place their order. Their menus are collected, and the waitress walks away.

Madoka gives Mami a sheepish smile. She settles into her seat, still pressed close against Homura's side. "Are you two enjoying Tokyo? Did you have a chance to tour Shibuya like you had wanted to?"

Mami nods. "Yes, those stores you had recommended were just what I was looking for. Thank you for going out of your way to send me that list."

Madoka waves her hands. "Not at all, Mami-san! I haven't been in Tokyo for that long, so I wasn't sure if I would be able to help you."

Homura leans forward, resting her elbow on the table to support her chin on her open hand. She takes in the decor, not at all interested in their small talk.

A light touch on her side has looking over, and to no surprise, Madoka is eyeing her, worry clearly written on her face.

"Ha!"

They both glance to Kyouko, watching as she pumps a fist in the air.

"Finally beat your score, Mami." Her grin is smug, and she slides the phone over to show Mami the screen.

Mami's eyes narrow, and she surprises the other two when she all but snatches the phone out of Kyouko's hands.

"What! That's—impossible." She promptly forgets her surroundings, concentrating on her phone instead.

Homura raises an eyebrow.

Kyouko smirks, pointing her thumb in Mami's direction. "Mami's really competitive." Her voice is still smug. "But—" she interrupts herself, gaze cutting across when she spots the waitress approaching their table with a tray in her hand.

"Here are your drinks." Two iced coffees are gently placed on the table, and Kyouko impatiently taps her foot as straws are pulled out, and then presented to Homura and Madoka. "Here is your order of fries and onion rings."

Kyouko nods, her hands gesturing for the waitress to slide the plates her way. "Thanks."

"Your other dishes will be out shortly."

Madoka smiles in acknowledgement, and the waitress bows, before disappearing again.

A straw is placed by her hand, and Madoka looks over to see Homura already taking a sip.

"How is it?" Madoka asks her as she moves for her own coffee.

Homura lightly lifts a shoulder, still deciding. She finishes her sip, and pushes her drink over for Madoka to try.

Mouth full, hands full, Kyouko quirks an eyebrow as they share drinks. "...are you two always like that?"

Homura pauses, forgoing another sip as her eyes slide to Kyouko's direction. "Like what?"

Kyouko stuffs more fries into her mouth. "Watchwing byou twmo—makes my teeth hurt."

Blinks, and confused silence washes over them.

"Perhaps," Homura drawls out after a moment, "you should get your teeth checked."

As the last fry disappears into her mouth, Kyouko pulls the onion rings her way.

"Maybe a regular check-up would be wise as well," Homura comments.

Kyouko smirks, showing off glimpses of chewed food; if Mami had been paying attention, it would have earned her a pinch on her arm.

"I'm as healthy as can be."

"I don't doubt it."

Madoka smiles, nervous. "You definitely can eat a lot, Kyouko-chan."

"A lot is putting it lightly, Madoka."

Madoka gently digs her elbow into Homura's side, eyes briefly flickering to her direction. "Did you skip breakfast today, Kyouko-chan?"

"Nope." One more onion ring dipped into ketchup, before Kyouko devours it without preamble. "I just have a fast metabolism." She shrugs, already growing tired of the topic. "How's bluey doing?" She points an onion ring at Madoka. "You talk to her, right?"

"Ah, uhm, Sayaka-chan? Yes—she's doing fine. Or," Madoka bites her lip, "at least, when I last talked to her she seemed to be doing better..." Her voice trails off, because she knows how upset Sayaka's parents had been at her disappearance.

Kyouko stacks the empty plates on top of one another, and then she's moving for her soda. "Well, she better be practicing—finals are no joke. She definitely dished out some moves, but she's gotta step up her game if we want to win."

Homura settles back against her seat, drinking her coffee, and Madoka already knows she has abandoned the conversation. She gives Kyouko another nervous smile.

"Well, Sayaka-chan was pretty good at those kinds of games during high school. She's uhm..." She gathers her drink in her hands, needing something to keep them occupied, "she'll, be okay...?"

Kyouko looks at her, eyes narrowed like crimson slits. "You don't sound too sure."

"Uhm," Madoka falters; Sayaka had admitted to her that she wouldn't know if she'd be able to make it this weekend, what with her upcoming math test, and her parents less than happy.

Kyouko places her arm on the table, leaning forward. With her sharp eyes, and the small glint of her fang, she strikes an intimidating figure. "She say something? She's not backing out, is she?"

"U-Uhm—"

"Ha!"

Kyouko flinches back when Mami, in her excitement, punches her on her shoulder.

"I beat your score, Kyouko," she's grinning, but it takes a moment until she finally remembers her surroundings. She places her phone onto the table, discreetly sliding it over for Kyouko to see as she tries to cover her outburst with a cough.

One look at Homura, and then the nervous smile Madoka gives her tells her that she hasn't fooled anyone.

"Ah, I apologize for uhm," she clears her throat, trying to fill the awkward silence with a better excuse. She catches a glimpse of their waitress, and claps her hands in excitement. "Oh! Look, our food is here!"

Kyouko perks at the mention of more food, and abandons Mami's phone at once. "Finally! I'm starving."

Homura and Madoka exchange a look. At Homura's raised eyebrow, Madoka smiles in amusement.

"That's—ours," Homura breaks eye contact, instead reaching forward for the plate that Kyouko has tried to claim as her own.

Kyouko scowls at being discovered, but she's quickly reaching for her pasta a second later.

As they eat, Madoka and Mami fill the silence with random chatter, and Kyouko occasionally makes a rude comment or two. Homura remains quiet, listening, but not participating.

Every so often, Madoka glances her way, as if to make sure that she's there; as if to remind her that she's not alone.

The food is sub par, and the atmosphere isn't as cozy, but she finds that she doesn't quite mind being here.

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"They're interesting, aren't they, Homura-chan?"

Homura hums, gaze directed at the walls they pass on their way back home. "You could have gone with them." It's said as is, but Madoka can't help but interpret it as a dismissal.

"It's okay; we made more plans this weekend."

Homura frowns at the reminder. "Maybe I'll sit that one out..."

"Mm... It's up to you." Madoka stares forward, absently swinging their clasped hands as she thinks to their earlier departure. "Mami-san did look pretty disappointed though..." She chews her lip, feeling that bit of guilt for once again turning down Mami's invitation.

"She has Kyouko to keep her company."

"She seems lonely."

Homura glances at her briefly. "In what way? The two of them seem to get along fine."

Madoka taps her chin with her free hand. "It's—a feeling, I get from her." She shrugs, continuing to swing Homura's hand. "I'm—still really curious about their relationship..."

"Friends?"

Madoka shakes her head. "Closer?"

"...lovers?" The look Madoka gives her makes her pause. Homura blinks. "What?"

"Well, that is close..." Madoka's voice sounds almost wistful.

"Madoka?"

Madoka smiles, and moves to bump her hip against Homura's leg. "Maybe... but, they don't seem like a couple."

"Why are you so curious anyways?"

"Uhm..."

They both stop walking, and wait for the light at the intersection to turn green.

Homura is still eyeing her, waiting for an answer. Madoka mulls over what she should say, but Homura suddenly straightens out.

"Ah, is it because of Miki Sayaka?"

Madoka smiles lightly, her fingers curling in to give Homura's hand a squeeze. Even if it seemed like she didn't care, she always did remember the small details.

The light turns, and they start crossing.

"Do you remember Hitomi-chan?"

"Yes." They had met briefly during spring break. "What about her?"

Madoka turns Homura's hand, and lightly bounces their palms against each other. "...She used to like Kamijou-kun."

Homura blinks. "He was rather popular then. Did you like him too?"

Madoka shoots her a glare. "No." She sounds almost insulted.

Homura shrugs. "I was just wondering."

As they move to step onto the sidewalk, Madoka punches Homura's arm.

"Ow."

"Anyways, it took a while—until things were okay again between Hitomi-chan and Sayaka-chan. Even when Hitomi-chan and Kamijou-kun were dating though... Sayaka-chan still didn't give up on him."

"She is surprisingly romantic."

Madoka smiles, drawing herself closer to Homura. "She's never really shown any interest in anyone besides Kamijou-kun..."

"Except he is no longer in the picture, and a garbage disposal has taken his spot."

Madoka knows it's wrong to laugh, and she only half fails in giving Homura a stern look. "...Kyouko-chan really can eat, can't she?" she admits. "I'm kind of envious—considering how much she eats, her body is still so lean; I put on weight so easily..."

"Well, that's probably because there's nowhere for the weight to go—ow—"

Madoka pulls her hand away. feeling a bit smug when she sees Homura moving to rub her arm. "So, Kyouko-chan isn't bad. She seems to get along well with Sayaka-chan, and Sayaka-chan definitely needs something that will take her mind off of Kamijou-kun."

They turn the corner.

"And, if those two are a couple?"

Madoka bites her lip. Her gaze slides to Homura.

Homura narrows her eyes, feeling a sense of foreboding. "...What?"

"Nothing—nevermind."

Homura eyes her. She abruptly stops, the action pulling Madoka back with her.

"Homura-chan?"

"...You were going to suggest Satoshi, weren't you?"

Madoka suddenly finds the wall to their side very interesting. "N-No, of course not..."

"Two idiots don't make a genius, Madoka." She continues walking, tugging Madoka with her. "And besides, Satoshi is a bit indisposed right now."

Madoka lowers her eyes. "Sorry, that wasn't—I didn't mean—"

Homura sighs. She squeezes Madoka's hand, and when Madoka finally looks up, Homura shakes her head. "It's fine; knowing him, he'll probably be awake soon enough to annoy me..." She frowns. "The two of them are rather similar..." She shudders, "the two of them, together..."

Madoka grins, merely because Homura looks absolutely disturbed imagining Sayaka and Satoshi dating.

They've reached their apartment complex, and after checking their mail, they head for their apartment. Once there, Madoka reluctantly lets go of Homura's hand, giving her space to unlock the door.

The door is pushed open, and Homura lets Madoka take the first step inside. She moves further in to make room for Homura to enter, and when the door is cleared, Madoka closes it.

Homura is in the midst of slipping off her boots when Madoka's voice draws her from her thoughts.

"I'm sorry," she straightens up, turning to face her, "what did you ask me, Madoka?"

Madoka stares at her, fingers pushing together as she nervously fidgets. "Homura-chan, can I ask you something?"

Homura blinks, tilting her head slightly. "Why the sudden formalities?"

"N-No reason... it's just..." Madoka averts her eyes, expression looking almost shy.

Homura quirks an eyebrow, but her body suddenly tenses. "You're not going to ask me something about Satoshi, are you?"

Madoka quickly shakes her head, "no! Not—Not about that..."

Homura relaxes. "Then, ask away?"

She finishes taking off her boots, and watches as Madoka rearranges her shoes nearby. When they're done, they both step into the living room, feeling the plush of carpet under their feet.

"Madoka?"

"Uhm..." Madoka fidgets, trying to bring herself to voice her question.

Seeing that she needs a bit of time, Homura continues to the kitchen as Madoka trails after her.

"Water?"

Madoka shakes her head, taking a seat at the breakfast bar. "I'm okay."

Homura retrieves a cup from the cupboard, and once she's filled it with water, she slips into the seat across from Madoka.

She takes a small sip, and then lowers her cup to the counter with a small clatter. Madoka is watching her.

She waits a moment, but when Madoka remains quiet, she gives her an encouraging look. "Your question?"

Madoka nods. She glances to her hands, and nervously wipes them on the front of her shorts. "Uhm, that is..." she raises her eyes, meeting Homura's curious ones, "Homura-chan..."

"Yes, Madoka?"

"Is—" she swallows, throat feeling dry, "is there a reason why you treat me differently? Compared to, uhm, Sayaka-chan, or Mami-san or Kyouko-chan?"

Homura blinks. "Differently?"

"Like—" Madoka gestures, feeling the tips of her ears warming, "...differently."

Homura stares at her for moment, trying to interpret her words and her actions. She draws a blank. "I'm not sure I understand your question."

Madoka huffs, in irritation for her own shyness, and at Homura's obliviousness. "You're a lot nicer to me than to them. We see each other every day, so I don't notice it that much... but, when we're with other people..."

"...Did you want me to treat you like how I treat them?"

Madoka frowns. "That's not what I meant." She pauses. "And, no, not really...?"

Homura leans back against her seat. "Then..."

Madoka presses her fingers together, "I just," she shyly glances up, "wanted to know if you had a reason," her voice drops lower, "or something..."

Homura places her arms on the counter, folding them on top of each other. She's quiet for a moment, until, "the day we met, I had gone to the coffee shop if only to avoid my roommates for a short while. The line was long, and I was already in a bad mood before I saw all those people waiting."

She leans forward, eyes closing.

"So there I was, annoyed, cold, and suddenly I'm on the floor, sporting a coffee stain all across my sweater." Her eyes open, and there's an amused glint to them. "I saw this ridiculous shade of pink hair, and I immediately remembered you—the girl who spilled coffee all over herself a few weeks back."

Madoka blushes, but she's also leaning forward, enthralled; she had never known the reason why Homura had extended a hand to her that day.

"The first thing I thought to myself was: 'this girl, is an absolute klutz.' And then you apologized, and you looked closed to tears, and I realized I wasn't the only one having a bad day."

Homura takes another sip of water as Madoka waits impatiently.

Madoka opens her mouth. "But—"

Homura tilts her head, "I guess, if I have to think about it... I saw something relatable in you. Am I kinder to you...? I guess I am." Her cup is placed on the counter, and she peers inside, almost absently. "I've... never met anyone like you before, Madoka. With everyone else," her eyes narrow, "it always feels like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop." Her eyes soften as she glances up, "I don't—always have to feel like I'm on guard when I'm with you."

"Homura-chan..."

They continue to stare at each other, but Homura suddenly leans back, eyes looking away. "I'm going to get changed." She abandons her seat, and Madoka can only watch as Homura exits the kitchen.

As she passes the counter, she turns back.

"Did you want me to help you with math?"

Studying is the last thing on her mind, but Madoka nods. "If you're not too busy?"

The smile Homura gives her makes her chest ache. "Not at all."

She slides off her chair; she might as well change too.

\\

It not her fault it's hard to concentrate. After all, their heads are bowed close, and she has the clearest view of Homura's face: eyelashes—Madoka's eyes narrow slightly—the healing cut that's still visible on her cheek.

"You're getting distracted again."

She quickly looks up, and a sheepish smile cuts across her lips. "Sorry."

Homura is not angry. Instead, she moves away to lean against the cushions. "Well, you do seem to understand your notes more." She glances over to the clock, surprised at the amount of time that had passed.

The cushions bounce lightly as Madoka collapses against her, arms stretched out. "Ahh... I think I'm at my limit."

Getting used to Madoka's antics, Homura merely moves her head so that Madoka doesn't accidentally punch her as she stretches.

"Perhaps we should take a break then?"

Madoka sits up, nearly hitting Homura in the jaw with her head. "We could try those snacks we bought at the market the other day!"

Before Homura can agree, Madoka's off the couch and eagerly stepping towards the kitchen.

Moving slowly, Homura follows after her. By the time she's taking a seat at the breakfast bar, Madoka emerges from the pantry with an armful of snacks weighing her down.

Homura raises an eyebrow. "What happened to rationing them?"

Madoka grins, tiptoeing slightly to dump the snacks onto the counter. "Help me choose which one to try first, Homura-chan."

Homura eyes her warily, aware of Madoka's sweet tooth. She doesn't want to encourage her, and selects a bag after a brief evaluation. "This one."

Disappointment flashes across Madoka's face, before it disappears as she grabs Homura's choice. The pre-cut line is found, and she tears off a corner of the packaging. She glances to Homura, who obediently holds out her hand. Once Homura has a few pieces, Madoka fills her own hand.

"Itadakimasu," they both echo.

They crunch down on the snack, letting the taste of fruit hit their tongues.

"Hmmmm," Madoka glances down to the packet: strawberry flavoured corn snack. "Three?"

"Two."

Madoka offers her some more. "Three," she says again after she finishes her portion. "It's not too sweet, and I can definitely taste the strawberry."

"In that case, one."

Madoka looks up. She pauses, but she remembers Homura's confession of why she hated berries—though she hadn't been very specific.

As if sensing her train of thought, Homura stands, her earlier used cup in her hand as she makes her way around the counter. "Did you want some water?"

"Sure. Thanks, Homura-chan."

"Mmhmm."

Another glass is pulled from the cupboard. Homura is turning to the refrigerator when she hears the rustling of bags.

"Are you opening another one?"

Not missing a beat, Madoka tears the new bag open. "Maybe."

"...Don't complain to me if you gain weight."

"Only these two," Madoka says as she pours a few of the new snacks into her hand.

Homura shakes her head; she already knows how this will play out.

/

Madoka groans. She's draped over Homura's legs, stomach filled with sugar and carbs. "Why didn't you stop me?" Her voice is muffled against Homura's knees.

"I did," Homura replies, her one hand gentle as she pats Madoka's back; it's a useless gesture, but Madoka knows that a few months prior, Homura would never have done this. "What part of 'don't complain to me if you gain weight,' did you not understand?"

Madoka groans again, and this time she turns her head to shoot Homura a glare. "You're supposed to be nicer about it. Like, 'Madoka, you shouldn't eat all those sweets, it'll make your tummy hurt and your mouth feel funny.'"

Homura's lips twitch. "'Madoka, you shouldn't eat all those sweets, it'll make your tummy hurt and your mouth feel funny.'"

Madoka smacks her on the leg.

"Ow—what was that for?"

"Little too late now, Homura-chan!"

Homura rolls her eyes. "It's not my fault that you have no self control."

"But I do..." Madoka is once again speaking into Homura's knees.

"Right."

She mumbles something that Homura is only able to catch bits and pieces of.

"What did you say?"

Madoka pushes off from Homura, using her arms to prop herself up. "I said you're a big meanie!"

Eyebrow lifted, Homura withdraws her hand. "Are you feeling better?"

"I really don't want to weigh myself later..."

"You're not even close to being overweight."

"If only I was a bit taller..."

"Then you'd be underweight."

Madoka glances to Homura, unconsciously taking in Homura's thin frame.

Sensing Madoka's gaze, Homura clears her throat. "If you're feeling better, we can continue studying."

Madoka groans, collapsing against Homura's legs once more. "Meanieeee."

She feels a pat against her back, and smiles to herself.

"Haven't you heard of the saying, 'misery builds character'?"

Madoka falls silent. She turns, her eyes seeking Homura's.

Suddenly nervous, Homura looks away. "We should study."

Madoka nods, and she finally sits up to move to her side of the couch.

Homura breathes a small sigh of relief. She glances over when there's a hand on her leg, only to find Madoka staring, like always, with those worried eyes of hers.

"If... you ever want to talk about it..."

She doesn't—and she never wants to think about it, either.

Instead, she swallows that sudden lump in her throat, eyes looking away as they burn with shame. "...Thank you," she mumbles.

Madoka smiles sadly. "Bathroom break, and then we can go over the rest of the problems?"

Relieved at the change of subject, Homura nods. "Sure."

"Be right back."

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She exits, towel in her hand as she dries her hair. She stops immediately when she's hears a voice: Homura. A quick glance, and she's by the dresser, back facing her as she talks with her phone in her hand.

"Yes." Her tone is short, punctuated with an almost hiss at the end. "I have class at that time. Yes—it's important that I go."

She sees Homura move, head bowed as she drags her hand over her face.

"No, I have work after. *No*," and this time, it's a real hiss. "No, I don't." Drawn out silence, quiet enough that Madoka can hear the other person on the line asking if she's still there. "Fine. No, her name is Madoka."

Madoka blinks, surprised her name had come up.

"What does she have to do with this?"

Madoka steps forward, even more curious; her towel is long since forgotten.

"No, she has class in the morning... No. Look, I already said it was fine, so drop it already. Yes—yes, I'll go! Why are you being so annoying?"

It's a deep, low voice, and Madoka takes another step, straining to hear: "I'll pick you up at around 9 then."

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Homu—"

The voice cuts off as Homura angrily jabs the disconnect button. She stares at her phone, trying to calm down.

Madoka bites her lip, debating if she should interrupt. Finally, "Homura-chan...?"

Homura whirls around, eyes wide behind the frames of her glasses, embarrassed at being caught.

"Uhm," Madoka nervously glances around, "the—bath's free," she finishes lamely.

Homura's fingers tighten around her phone, but she suddenly relaxes it before it can do any damage. "How much did you hear?"

Madoka bows her head, "s-sorry—I stepped out when you mentioned you had class at that time." Though she feels guilty at eavesdropping, her curiosity overshadows her nerves. "Is everything alright?"

Homura breathes out, letting the rest of her anger drain away. "Yes. Everything's fine."

Madoka waits for an explanation, but when Homura remains quiet, lost in her thoughts, she takes another step closer. "Homura-chan?"

Homura glances up. "Keiichi-san spoke with Satoshi's uncle; he'll... arrange things, so that we'll be able to visit." A pause. "Tomorrow."

Another step. "That's—good, isn't it?"

"Mm..." Homura closes her eyes. She opens them again when there's a touch on her hand.

"I can—"

Homura shakes her head, cutting her off. "No—you need to attend class. It shouldn't take that long. We're—just going to see him; he's still recovering, so we wouldn't be able to visit long, anyways."

Madoka draws back at Homura's dismissal. Seeing Madoka's rejected face, Homura quickly reaches for her hand.

"I won't lie," she swallows, face unsure, "...I'd feel better having you there."

Madoka glances up, "then—"

"But, I can handle it." Her voice is steady, but Madoka can see—is now aware of—the cracks that run along Homura's mask. Her eyes though, are pleading.

She hesitates. "Are you—sure?"

"Yes."

Madoka doesn't like it, but she lets it go. "What time are you leaving?" she asks instead, turning so that she can continue to dry her hair.

"In the morning. At nine."

Madoka looks to the clock: 10:25pm. "You should shower, and then head to bed after you take your medicine." She forces a small smile to her lips. "Otherwise, you'll definitely have trouble waking up, sleepy head."

The tension breaks, and the crushing weight on Homura's shoulders seem to lessen, just a little. "...I don't want to hear that coming from you."

Madoka responds with the best reply she knows: she sticks out her tongue. "Meanie."

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Madoka hugs Homu-chan close; it's a replacement, because Homura is finally sleeping in her own futon. There's plenty of space in her bed, and she misses the extra warmth already.

Never mind that it's summer.

She turns over, slightly restless. After seeing what had happened at the hospital last time, she doesn't want Homura to go alone.

Even though she knows she won't be alone, technically.

She buries her face into soft plush, sighing.

"...Still awake?"

She sits up, but realizes it's useless with the lights off. She lies back down. "Yeah... was thinking... about stuff."

They both know what stuff she means.

"...Sorry."

She sits up again. "For what, Homura-chan?"

She can hear blankets shifting, "mm... for dragging you into this mess. I never should have—"

"Homura-chan." Her voice is sharp, and Homura stops talking.

Her eyes have readjusted, and she quickly throws her covers off, still clutching the round bear to her chest. She scoots over carefully, not wanting to tumble off, and stops when she's able to perch on the edge of her bed. She can see a dark lump on the floor, lying just a bit away.

"How many times do I have to tell you—I don't mind. I'm here for you. You're not alone." Frustrated tears gather in her eyes; she hates how helpless she is and how she's unable to reassure Homura of her presence.

She doesn't mean for it to happen, but a small sniffle sneaks out.

More shifting, and she knows that Homura's probably sitting up now.

"Madoka?" Her voice is small, unsure.

Madoka angrily swipes at her eyes. Despite her efforts, she sniffles again.

She hears more rustling, and the soft footsteps as Homura crosses the room. When light floods in, her eyes close, and she buries her face into Homu-chan.

"Madoka?" A gentle hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay...?"

She makes a small sound, refusing to lift her head.

"Madoka?" The bed dips as Homura takes a seat next to her. "Hey, why are you crying?"

She finally raises her head, knowing her eyes are red and puffy, to glare at Homura. "Because! You—!"

Homura blinks. "Mado—"

Madoka moves forward, and Homura automatically catches her, steadying them both before they fall off the bed.

Madoka ignores it, and instead punches Homura on the shoulder.

"Ow—"

"You're—stupid—stubborn—" each word is punctuated with a hit, and Homura winces, even though it's not hard enough to hurt.

Madoka continues, each punch weaker than the previous.

Finally, she stops, collapsing against Homura. After a moment, arms tentatively slip around her waist.

"Are you done?"

She presses her face against Homura's shoulder, suddenly embarrassed at her outburst. "...Yeah." Her face burns, and the extra warmth from Homura makes her body feel like it's on fire. Sweat clings to her neck and back, and only her shame keeps her from running to the bathroom. "Sorry..."

To her surprise, Homura's arms wrap around her tighter, and she can feel her body shaking—as Homura laughs into her ear.

"You're—definitely not like anyone I've met, Madoka." She holds her for a moment longer, before she pulls back. Her hands are gentle as she brushes the tears from Madoka's cheeks. "Thank you."

Homura smiles—and that ache in Madoka's chest grows.

"I'll get you some water; you can wash up." Homura hesitates, waiting for a reply.

"Okay," Madoka mumbles as she wipes her eyes.

"I'll be right back."

Madoka nods, and also moves off the bed. After one more glance to Homura who's reaching for her glasses, she disappears into the bathroom.

\\

She stares at the ceiling—at the darkness that blankets the room.

"...Homura-chan?"

"Hmm...?"

She smiles to herself, liking how close that voice is, because Homura is a mere hand's reach away. She turns over, somehow knowing that Homura is staring at her. "Have you thought about coming home with me?"

"Mm... a little bit."

Madoka searches for Homura's hand, smiling when she feels the brush of soft fabric. She knows it's Amy, because Tora-kun is mostly likely pressed against Homura's face.

She threads their fingers together. "Think about it, okay? We should sleep, you have an early day tomorrow."

"...Goodnight, Madoka."

She squeezes Homura's hand. "Goodnight, Homura-chan."

She turns over, once again staring at the ceiling. It takes her a few more minutes, until she closes her eyes, letting the sound of Homura's gentle breathing lull her to slee**p.**

AN: an update from me?

As always, thanks for reading/reviewing. New faces, old faces; hello, hello. I am still very much team Madohomu, in case you ever wonder to yourself where I have gone. Just-writing takes a lot of time and maybe I'm a bit writed-out, and maybe just a little busy and just a lot lazy.

Will I finish? Well…

Take care.

Her eyes slowly open, body reacting to the sharp tones of her alarm. It takes her a moment, until her mind clears. As she moves to grab her phone, she is drawn back, finding her arm held in place.

She turns, and the scent of strawberry hits her nose as a mess of pink hair tickles her skin: Madoka gripping her arm, and using it like a pillow.

With a bit of a struggle, she manages to snag her phone from the night stand, and promptly shuts down her alarm. She breathes a small sigh of relief at the silence, and leaves her phone by her side as she tries to make herself comfortable.

The dread of going to the hospital keeps her under the covers, though she's sure Keiichi wouldn't like her excuse of a baby koala preventing her from getting ready.

Not wanting to face the day just yet, she turns over; she has some time since she had set her alarm earlier than needed. She'll sleep for a bit longer. Her eyes close, and she unconsciously moves closer to Madoka, seeking the comfort of her warmth.

It doesn't take long for her to nod off.

A little later when Madoka's alarm blasts through the room, she wakes, panicked. Sitting up, she looks around, eyes wide. A few seconds, and it dawns on her the origin of the loud sound.

She sighs, and runs one hand through her hair.

"Nn..."

She turns, watching as Madoka stirs. She grips Homura's arm tighter, snuggling against it.

Homura blinks when she realizes that Madoka is going back to sleep.

Slightly amused, she tries to shake her awake. "Madoka? Madoka."

"Five more minutes..."

If the alarm wasn't so grating, Homura would definitely let her sleep. The noise however, is starting to hurt her head. She shakes her again. "Madoka? Your alarm." She leans in closer, "Madoka?"

Sharp blinding pain, and she winces, moving her head away to rub her jaw.

"Ow..." Madoka finally wakes, releasing Homura's arm to rub her forehead. She blinks when she notices Homura nursing her jaw. "Oh no, did I hit you again, Homura-chan?"

"Quite a finishing move you have, Madoka," Homura murmurs, pulling her hand away to check the damage. She's relieved when only a dull pain lingers. "If anyone ever attacked you, just head butt them and you'll definitely win."

Despite her sleepiness, Madoka is still awake enough to smack Homura's arm.

"Ow—that move could work too."

Madoka shakes her head in slight exasperation. She sits up, and reaches over to shut off her alarm.

Silence, and Homura falls back onto her pillow, breathing a sigh of relief. "Much better."

"Sorry." Absently, Madoka starts fixing her hair, knowing sleep tended to turn it into a mess of tangles.

Once done, she faces Homura, finding her with her eyes closed as she hugs Tora-kun and Amy close to her chest.

"Homura-chan?"

"Hm...?"

Madoka glances to the clock; it's still early, as she had also deliberately set her alarm earlier than usual.

"...Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

Those sharp lavender eyes slowly open, and Madoka knows she would gladly let herself get lost in that gentle gaze. She quickly catches herself, and pushes her distracted thoughts away to focus on Homura's words.

"...I'm fine. It'll probably be a short visit; Satoshi is still pretty drugged up. I'm not even sure if he'll be awake when we get there." Homura's expression is suddenly distant, eyes staring beyond Madoka, to memories only she can see.

She starts when a hand is held to her cheek; gentle, and warm. Rose pink, and a soft smile.

"How are you?" Madoka asks softly.

Homura sighs, eyes closing, though she doesn't pull away. "Truthfully?" She hugs Tora-kun and Amy tighter. "...I don't want to go."

Madoka waits for Homura to gather her thoughts, resisting the urge to lean in and —she swallows, and retracts her hand just as Homura opens her eyes.

"...Maybe I will go with you to Mitakihara."

Madoka blinks, surprised at the sudden answer. "You will?" She knows she should be happy, but it's hard to muster the enthusiasm when Homura looks as fragile as glass. "...Homura-chan."

Homura sits up, pushing the blankets away. "I should get ready." She's gentle as she leaves Tora-kun and Amy on her abandoned pillow, arranging them side by side.

Madoka knows to drop the subject, but when Homura glances at her, she knows that they'll talk about it, later.

"Okay," Madoka replies.

Homura moves off the bed, and despite the situation, Madoka smiles as she watches Homura tuck Tora-kun and Amy in.

One last pat of the blankets, and another shy glance from Homura, before she heads to the bathroom.

As soon as the door shuts close, Madoka sighs, and flops over, half landing on her pillow. She turns her head, and when she sees that Tora-kun and Amy have moved from her actions, she rearranges them back onto the pillow. She pats the blankets, and stares at Tora-kun's fuzzy face.

Propping herself with one arm, she pokes his nose, feeling the tap of plastic underneath her fingertip. "Tora-kun, you think Homura-chan will be alright?"

There's no response, and Madoka lowers her head, closing her eyes.

"Mm, but we'll be there for her, won't we?"

She snuggles closer, feeling the lingering warmth from Homura's body heat.

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As she watches the bread slowly toast, her throat prickles, and she stifles a yawn. She wipes the tears away, but another yawn has her eyes once again closing. A

swipe of her eyes with her sleeve this time, before her eyes immediately open when the smell of something burning hits her nose.

"Ah!" She frantically opens the oven, reaching for the toast before it blackens further. "Ouch! Hot, hot!" She drops them to the waiting plate nearby, and then blows air to cool down her fingertips.

"...You should use chopsticks next time," a voice cuts in.

She turns around, cheeks flushing at being caught. "Ah, you're uhm, done changing, Homura-chan?"

"Mmhmm." Homura steps closer, hands readjusting her jacket sleeve as she enters the kitchen.

Madoka eyes her slim frame; slightly envious, but mostly wistful. When Homura pulls her hair back, exposing a bit of her pale nape, Madoka quickly looks away, face warming.

"Did you manage to not burn it?"

Madoka jumps at the closeness of her voice. She turns, but Homura is staring at the counter, more specifically at her attempt at toast.

"Hmm, not too bad; it smelled more burnt than it looks." Homura raises her eyes, lips quirked ever so slightly, "guess I'll have to find a new job soon."

A second, and Madoka clears her throat, putting her hands on her hips as she scowls. "...If you think I'm going to let you leave your job so easily, you don't know me very well then, Homura-chan." They share a look, until Madoka's scowl flips into a pout. She pokes one of the burnt edges, "I only looked away for a little bit."

"That's all it takes," Homura tells her, moving over to the cabinets to retrieve two of their larger cups. On her tiptoes, and she pulls them down. She pauses, looking at them, and then turns to Madoka, holding them up for her to see. "Well, I don't think I'll ever get fired from this job though."

Madoka gives Homura a wide smile, "Homura-chan, come here please." Her voice is pleasant, but Homura responds by slowing back away.

"No thank you, Madoka. Milk? Juice?" She inches to the refrigerator, knowing that Madoka won't hit her if her hands are full.

Madoka eyes her, well aware of her tactics. "Milk—" she holds up one finger, "and not another word!"

"...Milk it is," Homura replies, placing the cups on the counter in order to leave her hands free.

Madoka waits by the toaster, watching as Homura closes the refrigerator door. Milk in one hand, she slips her other hand through the handles of their mugs, and starts carrying them over.

As Homura passes her, Madoka reaches out, her hands seeking Homura's side: a well-known weakness that Sayaka had discovered early on. Homura dodges, sidestepping her attempt, and quickly continues on her way to the breakfast bar.

"I'll get you when you least expect it, Homura-chan," Madoka threatens with a smile as she picks up the plate of toast.

The cups lightly clatter on the breakfast bar, placed beside the waiting jar of jam. "I know," Homura replies, merely resigned to her fate.

Still smiling, Madoka moves to join her. They take their respective seats, and after an exchange of toast, milk, and a quick brush of jam, they dig in.

"...What time will Keiichi-san get here?" Madoka asks in between bites.

"...Mm... Nine? Maybe?" Homura lifts one shoulder in a half shrug, "from what I remember, he's worse than you at waking up."

If Madoka hadn't been eating, she would've stuck her tongue out. The smile Homura gives her tells her she is quite aware of that.

"I have a feeling he'll call me closer to ten."

Finished with her mouthful, Madoka quickly washes it down with milk. Before she takes another bite, "I'm not that bad; Sayaka-chan is worse than me!"

Homura hums in agreement, her mouth occupied with her food.

"...I used to wake up easily enough," Madoka mumbles into her toast. "I was usually up before Mama."

Homura nods, and Madoka shoots her a glare.

"...So says the sleepy head who always lies in bed for another hour after her alarm."

Homura looks up at her words, blinking. She swallows her piece, and sets her toast onto her plate. "...I can't help it; my heart is weak."

Her blank face, and Madoka frowns, but when she sees Homura's mouth twitch, it dawns on her that Homura is joking.

Her mouth drops open, and she's up and out of her chair, "Homura-chan!"

With a laugh, Homura pulls her legs up, arms held out to block the incoming punches.

"You! Are! So! Bad!"

/

The taste of strawberry jam still lingers, and she licks her lips absently as she makes her way to campus. She's cutting it rather close, but even the thought of being late does little to stop the smile stretching across her face.

Though Homura's reason for waking early had definitely been something not so happy, breakfast, and the time a little after, had ended on a high note.

She shakes her head, resisting the urge to roll her eyes at Homura's attempt at humour. Lost in her thoughts, she doesn't lift one leg high enough, and stumbles on the uneven concrete.

With a shout, she catches herself, and her face flushes at the looks sent her way. With one hand gripping her bag, she speeds up her pace, head slightly bowed to avoid eye contact.

Thinking of Homura tended to distract her, and reluctantly, she pushes thoughts of her out of her mind. Equations, formulas—the closeness of her face.

She stops at the corner, heat pooling from her neck, not just because of her brisk walk. She tries again, sneakers tapping on the sidewalk as she starts reviewing her math homework.

It only makes her recall Homura's explanations—her quiet voice, her—

She shakes her head in frustration, and then blushes when she feels the stares.

Luckily, the light changes, and she's following the crowd across the street.

She tries to keep her thoughts from wandering, but after another few seconds, she realizes that it's no use. Her eyes soften as she slowly sighs.

She has definitely fallen hard.

\\

As she sits with her books in front of her, she finds it hard to focus. Her fingers tap the counter as memories she doesn't want to remember surface. She sighs, lowering her head on top of her notebook. Just as her eyes close, her phone beeps, and that horrible feeling in her stomach increases tenfold.

With a shaky breath, she reaches for her phone. She sighs in relief when it's a message from Madoka. She blinks, eyebrow raising when she notes the time: Keiichi is definitely late, and Madoka will definitely be late to her class.

She checks the message, skimming once, and then rereading it to make sure she didn't miss anything.

A brief lick of her lips, and she sits up, fingers poised to type out a reply.

'I'm doing okay. He hasn't called yet, but I'm not surprised. Aren't you late?'

The message is sent, and she continues to stare at her phone.

The reply is almost instantaneous, and her lips quirk at the sound. Another read, and she smiles when she reaches the end.

'Thank you.' She pauses, trying to think of the words. 'I'll text you if anything else comes up. You don't need to worry. Please pay attention in class. I will talk to you later.'

She follows Madoka's cue, and adds a few emojis at the end. A sun, a book, a tiger, and after a brief debate, she sends the last emoji, copying the one that Madoka had sent her.

It's not as embarrassing this time, though she still feels a brief bit of heat flare up. She lightly smiles, but her face immediate drops when her phone rings.

She sighs, feeling her mood plummet, and the dread grow in the pit of her stomach.

Swallowing hard, she jabs the accept button, and then places the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hey." Keiichi's voice is gravelly, sounding like he had just woken up. "I'll be there in ten. You ready?"

She rolls her eyes, holding the phone with her shoulder as she starts packing. "No," she answers truthfully.

"You need a few more minutes?"

"Maybe another lifetime." She waits a beat. "Or two."

Keiichi sighs, and she knows he's probably dragging his hand over his face. "Homura."

She retrieves her bag from the floor. "Ten is fine."

"Alright. I'll see you then."

"Yes. See you."

The connection is cut just as she pulls the phone away.

She sighs, bag in her lap as she stares at her books.

Today is definitely going to be a long day.

\\

She decides to wait outside, and is standing by the curb when Keiichi's car pulls up. She opens the door, and makes a face at the musty smell.

"Why does it smell like you slept in here?" she comments as she grudgingly takes a seat. She shoves the trash on the floor aside, and after another look, decides to keep her bag in her lap.

"You eat yet?" Keiichi asks, ignoring the comment and holding out a calorie mate in her direction. "You should eat."

She slams the door shut, frowning at the smudge of oil felt on the handle. "You should clean," she counters as she pulls out her handkerchief to wipe her hands.

Keiichi merely places the offered snack on top of her bag, and then moves to shift gears. "Ready?"

Handkerchief pocketed, she clicks the seat belt on. "Yes."

"Alright." He glances at the mirror, checking traffic, before pulling into the street.

She frowns as she stares out the window, and after a few minutes of silence, Keiichi clears his throat.

Turning to him, she raises an eyebrow, but waits for him to say whatever he wants to say.

"So... We'll probably have maybe half an hour or so before we need to leave."

She nods; she had expected it, but still thinks half an hour is too long. She opens her mouth, "...are you sure we're still okay for time?"

The car slows down to a stop at the light. As they wait, he glances over. "Gimme a piece of that." He nods to the calorie mate.

She sighs, but reaches for the package. The plastic is ripped open, and a piece is pulled out, "here."

His eyes are focused on the road, and when he holds one hand out in response, she places a stick in his waiting palm.

"Thanks." He takes a bite, and she turns back to stare outside the window.

"I already talked to your uncle—"

"He's not my uncle."

Keiichi pauses, using the silence to finish the rest of his calorie mate instead. "...I talked to Satoshi's uncle before I called you; they're planning to visit him in the afternoon, after lunch. The doctors say he'll be most lucid during that time."

Homura sits back, processing his words, but not responding to them.

Keiichi gives her a quick side glance. "...Did your friend like the Homurice?"

Homura shifts, accidentally kicking at the trash at her feet. She frowns. "Omurice," she emphasizes, "but... she was curious about the recipe." She is not looking at him, but he knows her enough to hear the subtle interest in her voice.

He smirks to himself, and he can almost feel the daggers of her stare. "...You never had the patience to learn back then, which is why Sensei never taught you."

She glares, swallowing that sudden lump in her throat. "It's different now. I'm—he's—" she cuts herself off, turning to the window.

When she remains quiet, Keiichi sighs softly. One hand thumps the steering wheel, making her jump. "...You want to know the real reason why he never told you the recipe?"

She blinks, glancing over in curiosity.

The light changes, and Keiichi takes his time easing the car into the turning lane. Homura waits, impatient, and only when the car is stopped at another signal, does he reply.

"Sensei taught you how to stand on your own, but he knew he wouldn't be able to teach you anything else. 'When I'm gone, Homura will leave too. She's stubborn, and you're too soft on her, Keiichi; you won't be able to stop her.'"

He stares out the windshield as Homura concentrates on his face: stubble, and more lines showing his age. She blinks when he glances her way.

"Not even Himeko could convince you."

She lowers her eyes, focusing on the center console.

Minutes pass, and only when the car dips lightly, does she look up, surprised when she realizes they've arrived at the hospital. Unlike the other day, Keiichi has to steer the car further back into the parking lot, finding the hospital much busier during working hours.

He finally finds an empty spot, and turns in.

Even when the engine is turned off, they remain seated.

"'She won't have a reason to come back, but maybe, one day she'll randomly feel like eating Homurice, and she'll come looking for you.'"

Keiichi turns, giving Homura a pointed look.

Her eyebrows furrow, and she turns away, one hand reaching for the door handle. With a sigh, Keiichi moves to do the same.

Once the doors are locked, Homura silently leads the way to the front entrance, bag held close to her side as Keiichi trails after with his hands tucked into his pockets.

"This place sure brings back memories," Keiichi comments.

Homura glances over her shoulder, "...we were just here a few days ago."

"It looks different at night."

She shrugs, "it looks the same to me."

The entrance is bustling with visitors, but Homura strides in unfazed as Keiichi follows her. She approaches the front desk, and today, it's the same stern looking woman that's usually here when she has her appointments.

She looks surprised to see her, "you're back so soon for your appointment? Is there something wrong?"

Homura shakes her head, schooling her face to her blank mask of indifference. "I'm actually here to visit someone." She gives Keiichi a side glance, and he clears his throat, taking a step forward to join her.

"Hikaru Satoshi," Keiichi tells her.

The receptionist raises her eyebrows at the name, but before she can respond, Keiichi continues.

"His uncle should've granted us permission...? Suzuki Keiichi, and Akemi Homura." He stares at her, his mouth twitching up into what he assumes is a charming smile, but he winces when Homura elbows him in the stomach. "Ow."

Homura sighs, slightly shaking her head.

"Ah, well," the receptionist gives them a look over. She stares at Homura for a few seconds, before turning to the computer on her desk. "Alright, let me see if anything was written."

"Thank you," Homura murmurs quietly.

There is no response as the woman checks the files, and not wanting to make small talk with Keiichi, Homura turns her head, staring towards the location of the waiting room.

Hushed whispers, and the usual sounds of the hospital fill her ears. When the clack of the keyboard stops, Homura faces the receptionist just in time to see her lift her head.

"Ah, yes, it seems there had been something mentioned." She eyes them again, but suddenly turns to her desk to rifle through her papers. She produces a black marker, and slides that over along with a small sheet of pre-cut name tags. "Your full name. His room is on the 10th floor, room 1073B." She waits a beat, "I assume that you'll be able to navigate without a map?"

Homura nods, and moves for the marker, but Keiichi reaches it first. She glares, but he ignores her, instead fitting the marker into his hand as he flashes the receptionist another smile. This time, Homura rolls her eyes in response.

"Thank you," Keiichi's eyes flickers down briefly to the woman's name tag, "Haruka-san."

Homura snatches the marker away, leaving Keiichi with a black streak at the end of his tag. He frowns, but Homura is already writing; two more strokes, and she places the marker down.

After the tag is quickly placed on, she gives a slight bow to the receptionist, "thank you."

"...Good luck, Akemi-san."

Her departing words leaves Homura puzzled, and she turns back, only to find the woman already moving to help the next person in line.

Homura sighs, and steps away from the reception desk to head into the hospital. Her strides are wide, and she doesn't wait for Keiichi who's still hastily jotting down his name.

With one last quick smile to the receptionist, Keiichi jogs to catch up with Homura as he clumsily slaps his name tag on.

He sidesteps a surprised nurse, and after giving an apologetic bow of his head, he joins Homura's side. "Eager to see him?"

Her footsteps immediately slow as she shoots him a glare.

Keiichi holds his hands out, but Homura turns away, unamused. He sighs, and with his hands in his pockets, he decides to keep his mouth shut as they make their way to Satoshi's room.

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The elevator ride is silent, interrupted only by the impatient tapping of Keiichi's shoe.

A hand clamps onto his arm, "can you stop that?"

He blinks.

"Please."

"Ah." He immediately stops, and Homura removes her hand. "...You know—"

She shakes her head. "...I know you mean well, but I don't really want to hear it. Not now."

They can both hear the unsaid 'not ever.'

He clears his throat. "...Alright." She turns away to once again glare at the doors, but the gentle tap on her head has her turning back around. "We will talk about this though."

They stare at each other, but when the elevator dings, Homura looks away and waits for the doors to open.

They move past the waiting passengers, silent as Homura continues to walk ahead.

Satoshi's room is at the end of a long hallway, and as they walk by the opened doors, Homura keeps her eyes glued in front while Keiichi curiously peers into each room.

Homura glances at him briefly. "You're being rude."

"Ah," he sheepishly scratches his head, "right."

Homura stops, and he realizes that they've arrived. Before they can enter, a nurse emerges, tablet in hand.

She gives them curious look, "family of Hikaru-san?"

When Homura doesn't respond, Keiichi steps in with a nod. "Yes, I'm his uncle." He gestures to Homura, "and she's his little sister."

It takes all of Homura's willpower not to glare, and she barely manages a stiff nod.

This time, the nurse gives a kind smile. "You're just in time; he woke up a little bit ago. He's doing very well. If his condition keeps up, he might be able to leave fairly soon." Her eyes flicker down, and she taps the screen on her tablet. "He's still a bit out of it because of the anesthesia, so don't be too surprised if he ends up falling back asleep."

Keiichi nods. "Thank you."

The nurse bows, and Homura murmurs a quiet thank you as the woman walks past them and into the hall.

Another glance, and when Homura makes no move to step inside, Keiichi takes the lead. Homura follows him slowly, eyes zeroing in on the figure lying on the hospital bed.

Satoshi has not yet noticed them, his gaze focused out the window. Homura absently remembers this side of the hospital faces the parking lot, with buildings that blocked most of the view. The familiar smell of antiseptic; the familiar machines sitting at his bedside. She presses a shaky hand to her leg, frowning as she steps closer.

Keiichi reaches the bed first. When there's still no sign of acknowledgement, he clears his throat.

Satoshi turns, blinking slowly in their direction. His hair is messy, and for once, an annoying smile is not on his face. It's the first time in a long while that Homura has seen him less than his usual self—she falters mid-step, and stops walking.

Satoshi's eyes widen. "I must be more tired than I thought." He squeezes his eyes shut, face scrunching, before he reopens his eyes. He blinks, but Homura sighs, and finally joins Keiichi by the bed.

"You look horrible," she tells him, point blank.

Keiichi lifts an eyebrow at her. "Homura."

To their surprise, Satoshi starts laughing, but immediately cringes in pain, his left arm grabbing for his right shoulder as he grits his teeth.

"Hey, you alright?" Keiichi leans over the bed, eyes searching for the call button, just in case.

"Yeah—" Satoshi breathes out. "Just let me—"

They wait for him to catch his breath, and after a tense moment, he finally cracks one eye open.

When he offers them a weak smile, Homura frowns, but keeps her comment to herself.

With both eyes now open, Satoshi focuses on Homura. "...See, I knew you cared."

Homura reaches behind her, fingers absently playing with her hair as she bites back another rude response. "You must be feeling okay if you're able to be your usual annoying self."

"Homura."

At Keiichi's reprimand, Homura glares out the window, randomly noting that the parking lot is filling up with visitors.

Undeterred, Satoshi merely grins, weakly waving Keiichi off. "Nah, I don't mind. It's nice—being treated like normal." He's still staring at Homura, waiting until she turns back before continuing. "Guess the tables are turned now, huh, Homu-chan?"

She lets his words hang as she eyes the bandages that are half hidden by his hospital gown. She lifts her gaze, meeting his eyes—and instead of the scathing remark he's waiting for, she closes her eyes, face relaxing.

Her eyes open. "Yes. The world works in mysterious ways."

Keiichi looks back and forth between them, ready to step in at any moment.

Satoshi blinks, but he's flashing a tired grin a few seconds later. "Madoka-chan didn't come with you? I bet just looking at her face would heal me right up."

Homura rolls her eyes. "She has class."

Satoshi nods as his eyes slowly start to droop close. "Bring her along next time... it's no fair you get to hog her all the time, Homu-chan..."

She sighs. "...I'll ask her, but no promises."

His eyes are closed, but his lips twitch into a smile. "...the strawberry cake from the station is pretty good."

Homura taps the railing of the bed, listening as metal rings, "don't push your luck."

He turns his head, sinking deeper into the pillows. "It was a recommendation, Homu-chan... It'll earn you some points from Madoka-chan..."

Her eyebrows furrow in confusion. "Points for what?"

Satoshi mumbles something in response, but his eyes remain closed.

"I think he's sleeping," Keiichi comments as he peers at Satoshi's face. They wait a moment, until Keiichi finally turns to Homura with a shrug. "The nurse did mention he would go back to sleep." He glances to the clock on the wall. "You have time before your class starts? Want to grab something to eat? There's a cafeteria here, isn't there?"

She looks over, frowning. "No, thank you. I've had enough hospital food to last a life time. I'll grab something on campus."

Keiichi scratches his chin. "All right, guess it's just another lonely breakfast for me and my lonesome self then."

Homura doesn't take the bait, and without looking back, she turns and starts heading to the door.

Another sigh, and one last glance at Satoshi, before Keiichi moves to follow.

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Her hand moves slowly, tracing circles and spirals in ink on the border of her notes. The professor's voice is dull in her ears, and most of her thoughts are on nothing—and of a specific person.

She looks up in surprise when she hears movement, and finally focuses on her surroundings to see her neighbours are packing up. Her gaze cuts across the room, and she blinks at the time.

She turns to her neighbour, catching them as they rise from their seat. "Uhm, is class over already?"

He nods, face slightly puzzled as he shoulders his bag. "Yes. Sensei has a doctor's appointment."

"Ah, thank you," she murmurs.

He nods again, already moving away. She turns, and reaches for her bag by her feet.

She gathers her things, and after she deposits them inside her bag, she immediately pulls out her phone. She's not expecting any messages, so when she sees the blinking lights of a notification, she tenses, bracing herself for whatever it may be.

The screen is unlocked, and she quickly skims the sender's name, sighing, and then shoulders slouching when she sees it's from Sayaka.

She quickly sends her a response, and even though she knows Homura is probably still busy, she sends a message her way. Not wanting to miss a potential reply, she turns back on the sound, and then pockets her phone.

She slips the strap of her bag over her head, and just as she stands, her phone lightly beeps. Assuming it's from Sayaka again, only once she's clear of the desks and the steps, does she decide to check her message.

Her eyes widen at the name. She rereads the message, and after a brief debate, she rushes out of the classroom, almost running into a few other students in her haste. She gives them embarrassed smiles, bowing her head in apology, before she continues her brisk walk into the hallway.

Through the double doors, and she squints from the bright daylight, blinking a few times to make her eyes adjust quicker. As soon as her vision clears, she makes a beeline towards one of the many large planters on campus. Once seated on the brick fencing, she takes a deep breath, before she unlocks her phone. She holds down the speed dial, and then places the phone to her ear.

The ringing echoes, and she absently stares across the campus, semi-hopeful that Homura will—

The ringing stops, replaced by a familiar soft voice.

"Shouldn't you be in class?"

She smiles. "Yes—well, no—I mean, the professor had a doctor's appointment, so we were let out early."

"I see."

"What about you? You're—done already? How, how is he? How are you?"

"Mm... It went okay."

She waits for Homura to continue, but when nothing else is said, she drops the subject.

"Where are you?" Madoka asks instead, settling her bag into her lap to make herself more comfortable.

"On campus. I had Keiichi-san drop me off."

Madoka immediately sits up, looking around even though she's sure she wouldn't be able to see her. "You are? Where at? I'm by the science building."

She hears shifting, and then, "I'm walking over there right now."

Madoka nods, feet placed on the floor as she moves to stand. "Which part are you entering from? Across the bridge?"

"Yes."

"I'll head over there right now."

"Uhm, should I just hang up then?"

Madoka readjusts her bag as she hastily walks to the other side of the building. "Stay on the line with me?"

"...Sure." There's a small pause, "uhm, so how was class?"

"It was okay... I guess..."

"I'm sorry I made you late."

The bridge is now visible, and Madoka straightens her back, hoping to catch a glimpse of a familiar figure. No sign.

"It's fine. That was kind of my own fault..." She smiles to herself, her free hand moving to brush down her hair. "I miiight have zoned out a little bit anyways..."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Madoka narrows her eyes, still scanning the area for Homura. "Hey, I'm not that bad at paying attention."

"Sure you aren't."

If Homura was there, Madoka would be pouting, and most likely sticking out her tongue. She searches the crowd, frowning when she still doesn't see Homura.

"Boo."

A light breath on her ear, and she whirls around, shrieking at the same time.

Homura quickly moves to catch the dropped phone as Madoka stares at her in surprise.

She's successful, and gives a small smile as she holds up the phone, "safe."

Madoka feels her face warm as she unfolds herself from her awkward pose. Her eyes dart around, and the campus is filled with enough students that the heat creeps up and fans out from her neck.

"Homura-chan!" She stomps her foot, glaring.

Hands are held out in surrender, though the smile still across Homura's face has Madoka continue to approach her.

"I'm sorry—" her apology is cut off as Madoka punches her. "Ow."

Madoka huffs, her breath ruffling her bangs as she continues to glare.

"Sorry," Homura murmurs, holding out Madoka's phone in appeasement.

Instead of accepting the phone, Madoka narrows her eyes. She scans the area again, and then takes a step forward. She leans in, hands clasping Homura's shoulder to force her to slouch to her height.

Her lips are close to Homura's ear, voice kept low. "I'm definitely getting you back later, Homura-chan."

Homura twitches as Madoka's breath tickles her skin. Words said, Madoka lets go, allowing Homura to pull back. The visible light blush across Homura's cheeks makes Madoka smile.

"Your class doesn't start until noon, right?" she asks while linking their arms together.

Homura nods slowly, one hand still held to her ear.

"Let's grab something from the canteen." Madoka tugs Homura's arm, "your treat, of course."

Homura blinks, but Madoka tugs her arm again, prompting her to walk forward.

"R-Right. Uhm, here's your phone..."

Madoka nods, quickly taking it and slipping it into her pocket. Before Homura can pull away, her hand is grabbed, and Madoka lets their arms swing as they make their way to the center of campus.

As they walk, Madoka leans forward, giving Homura a view of the grin across her face. "Of course, this still doesn't mean that I won't get you back."

Unsure, Homura nervously tugs on the strap of her bag.

Sensing her unease, Madoka's grin softens to a smile. "I promise I would never hurt you, Homura-chan."

Homura blinks, turning to her in confusion. Her mouth opens, but Madoka suddenly leans forward again.

"...Last one to the store has to buy and eat their 'surprise onigiri.'"

The warmth disappears from Homura's side as Madoka drops her hand to dash away. She's not quite a blur of pink, but after a moment, Homura realizes that Madoka is becoming smaller, and the idea of buying a surprise onigiri is looming closer.

Homura immediately moves to catch up to Madoka who's already a good distance ahead.

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As she chews, she schools her face, making sure to not let her disgust show.

"How is it?" Madoka peers at her, waiting for a reaction.

She forces herself to finish her bite, and reaches for the bottle of tea that sits by her side.

A small sip to help wash it down, before she finally answers. "It's not bad." When Madoka continues to stare, she offers a few more words. "A bit bland. I was thinking it would be a bit more flavourful." She holds up the onigiri, barely holding back a smile when she sees Madoka eyeing it curiously. "Want to try?"

"W-Well..." Madoka tilts her head, on the verge of reaching for the offered food. To her surprise, Homura pushes past Madoka's hand, and holds the onigiri close to her mouth.

"Be sure to take a big bite," Homura tells her with a nod.

Madoka blinks, feeling slightly embarrassed at being fed. Her curiosity overcomes her embarrassment, and she obediently opens her mouth. A good sized chunk disappears into her mouth, and she pulls back, hand over her mouth as she chews.

Homura starts covering the onigiri back into its plastic wrapping. She quickly glances up when she hears a choked sound, and watches as Madoka's face twists in obvious disgust.

"Nn!" Madoka holds her hands in front of her mouth, her wide eyes searching their area for a napkin.

Unperturbed by Madoka's reaction, Homura leans back against the bench. "How is it?" She moves for her bottle of tea, but a strong hand clamps onto her wrist, forcing her to look at Madoka. "You don't like it?"

Madoka points to her mouth, making another muffled sound.

Homura finally breaks character, lips twitching into a smile at Madoka's expression. "It's delicious, isn't it?"

Madoka glares, and with a small laugh, Homura offers her a few napkins she had hidden away in her bag.

Madoka immediately spits out her mouthful. "That—is not bland, Homura-chan!"

Homura merely hands over her bottle of tea, and Madoka hastily reaches for it. As she swishes the liquid around her mouth, she continues to glare.

Covering her mouth with her hand, Homura tries to hide her smile. "Sorry." Her arm is punched, and she rubs at the spot. "You should hit the other side to balance it out..."

"You—are so bad, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, pouting. "How did you even eat that?" To emphasize her point, she takes another drink of tea.

Homura sets the offending onigiri aside to rifle through the bag for the normal onigiri they had purchased.

"I've had worse," she replies. She holds out a salmon one to Madoka in appeasement, who accepts it with a small murmur of thanks.

Comparing the two onigiris, Madoka shudders, and casts a side glance to the discarded onigiri. "Worse than that?"

Homura nods, pulling out another onigiri for herself. "My first attempts at cooking didn't taste very good, though they were filling."

Madoka turns to her, watching as Homura slowly pries the plastic wrapping apart. Like always, whenever Homura reveals a piece of her past, her curiosity burns, threatening to overflow. She quickly unwraps her onigiri, and takes a big bite to stop the onslaught of questions from spilling from her mouth.

They fall into silence as they eat, Homura with her attention to the sky, and Madoka occasionally sneaking glances her way.

When Homura is half done with her onigiri, her shoulders slouch, and she turns to Madoka with a small smile.

"I know you want to ask, so... ask."

Madoka swallows hard, and lowers her now empty hands to her lap. "How... How was the hospital?"

Homura nods, absently rewrapping her onigiri if only to keep her hands occupied. "He was awake when we got there." She pauses, trying to gather her thoughts.

"Homura-chan? You don't have to say anything if you don't—"

Homura shakes her head. "...It was, really weird," she says softly. "For once, he wasn't smiling, or giving his annoying grin. The white walls—I've always thought that the hospital made people seem more..." she gestures, onigiri still in her hand, "...more... fragile, I guess?" Her eyebrows furrow slightly, eyes distant.

A touch on her hand makes her flinch, and she almost drops her onigiri. She turns to find Madoka staring at her, as always—lately—face worried.

"Sorry..." the apology slips out, automatic, and the gentle hand on hers encircles her fingers.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Madoka tells her.

"Mm..."

They both jump when they hear a beep, with vibrations following after as Homura's alarm goes off. She reaches into her pocket, pulling out her phone to swipe off the program.

"Time for your medicine?" Madoka asks as she glances over to the screen, noting the time.

"Yes."

Madoka nods, quiet as Homura pulls her hand away to dig through her bag for her pills and water. It doesn't take long until Homura is tilting her head back, washing her medication down as she empties her water bottle.

When she's finished, she pulls the bottle away. "Done," she says softly, giving Madoka a smile.

It's not a smile that Madoka likes.

"...He made a comment," Homura murmurs, breaking the silence as the empty bottle twirls in her hands.

Madoka forces her gaze away from the bottle to focus on her, "what did he say?"

"How—we switched places." Homura glances over, "usually it was him, visiting me at the hospital..."

Madoka remains quiet, trying to think of a response, but Homura continues before she can say anything.

"When I saw him there..." Homura's eyes narrow slightly, but she suddenly relaxes, eyes closing as a small sigh escapes her mouth.

"...What happened?" Madoka asks softly; the temptation to grab Homura's hand only continues to grow.

"Well," the shine of lavender as Homura's eyes open, "...I really thought I'd be happy, but I felt..." she tilts her head, "...nothing?" She turns, facing Madoka, "maybe not nothing; maybe just..." her voice trails off, and she shakes her head. "I'm not sure, really. Something..."

Madoka nods slowly. "Relieved, maybe?"

"Relieved?" Homura echoes her, her confusion palatable in her tone.

Madoka nods, moving to take the bottle from Homura's hands to stop her nervous fidgeting. The bottle is set aside, and finding Homura's fingers cold, she starts rubbing them together to bring the warmth back.

"Relieved, that your brother wasn't hurt too badly," she answers after a moment. "That he's awake, and he's doing okay."

"I don't hate him," Homura says softly.

Madoka nods, wondering how many times Homura has repeated this in her mind. "You don't."

"But—he's not..."

"It's your choice, Homura-chan. No one gets to decide who's in your life, except for you." Madoka switches to Homura's other hand, repeating the same steps to warm them up.

"...Don't you have class soon?" Homura asks instead, trying to clear the air and the heaviness that has settled around them.

Madoka smiles, "don't think you can get rid of me so easily, Homura-chan."

Homura glances at her, her eyes staring as she tries to find meaning in Madoka's words. "...I wouldn't," she says softly.

Madoka pauses, her hands stopping briefly, before they continue their administrations. "Good, because I can assure you, I'd be very hard to get rid of."

Homura's lips twitch into a small smile. "I don't doubt that; you're... rather stubborn."

Madoka reluctantly lets go, if only to poke Homura's shoulder, "I don't want to hear that from you."

There's a small pause, before they both start laughing.

When they calm down, Homura turns to Madoka. "Thank you. You know, I'm glad you spilled coffee on me that day."

Madoka grins, and her punch is a lot more gentle this time. "I'm—glad I spilled coffee on you too, Homura-chan."

They share a smile.

"If—" Homura glances away, head bowed slightly as her bangs deliberately cover her face, "if... there's anything I can ever help you with, don't hesitate to ask me."

Madoka smiles, though this time it's because she's laughing at herself. "Thank you, Homura-chan. I'll... definitely hold you to that."

Homura nods. She moves to continue eating her onigiri, but stops when she catches Madoka still looking at her. "Did you have something in mind?"

Madoka shakes her head. "No. At least, not yet."

Homura quirks an eyebrow, but Madoka takes a big bite of her onigiri to keep herself from saying anything else.

"...I'll listen to anything you have to say."

Madoka nods, feeling her eyes burn; they're so close, and yet—

She swallows, and gives Homura a smile. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

Another nod, and they once again fall into silence.

The tightness around her chest grows, only eased as she sees how much more relaxed Homura is, compared to just the other day.

She'll wait. Even if it hurts, she'll wait.

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She's pushing open the door when she hears the familiar ringtone. Still moving, she turns her body to retrieve her phone from her bag. Another step, and she's suddenly pulled back when the strap of her bag snags on the handle. Startled, she barely manages to catch her balance as the phone slips from her hands.

With a shake of her head, she hurriedly extracts her caught bag, and then quickly crouches to pick up her phone, hands around it just as her music stops.

She frowns, fingers haphazardly dusting off the dirt, before she unlocks the screen to check the caller ID.

Not Homura, but she blinks when she sees the caller; they shouldn't have a reason to contact her so soon. Her stomach flips, and growing increasingly worried, she quickly pushes the redial button, and then brings the phone to her ear.

"Hey Ma—"

"Mama? What's wrong? Did something happen? Are you okay? Is Papa okay? Did something happen to Takkun?" She grips her phone tightly, body hunched as she waits for her mother to answer.

"Ahem." She hears her mom clear her throat. "Nothing's wrong, we're all doing okay."

She breathes a sigh of relief, feeling the tension drain from her body. "Then...?" She finally enters the apartment, and closes the door behind her.

"I'm more worried about you, Madoka," Junko tells her.

"Me?" In the process of taking off her shoes, she blinks in obviously confusion.

"Yes, you."

Madoka straightens out, hearing the disapproval in her mother's voice. "Uhm... why...?"

"Well, as I've been a bit pre-occupied these few days, I haven't had the chance to catch up on the news until today."

"The news...?"

"Yes, more specifically the news in Tokyo. The recent stabbing at the station."

"Oh. That."

"Yes, that! Are you girls okay? I don't want either of you walking home after dark—if Homura needs money to pay for the taxi, tell her that I will cover the cost."

"Mama—"

"Why did I ever let you talk me into letting you go to college in Tokyo? If you were back at home, I'd be able to drive you to school. Or I could even have someone from the office drive you."

Madoka's eyebrows furrow. "Mama?"

"I mean, it's understandable that the crime rate is higher in Tokyo—it's a bigger and older city, but I don't like the idea of it being just so close to where you're at. I know!" Junko snaps her fingers. "I'll find you a different apartment—one not so close to the station. No wonder it was such a great deal; new, with a very roomy layout for that price? Of course there's always a downside to having everything within walkable distance. It—"

"Mama!"

"...Yes, what is it, Madoka?"

Madoka smiles, and walks over to the couch. She sits on the arm rest, and absently kicks at the carpeted floor. "I'm fine, Mama. Me and Homura-chan are both fine." Relatively, though she doesn't say this outloud. "This is a great apartment, and we know how to take care of ourselves. You don't have to worry about us. Really."

Junko sighs, and Madoka can just picture her rubbing her brow to ease the tension.

"What's all this about, Mama? You're—usually the one telling me to calm down."

There's rustling, and what Madoka assumes is the creak of a chair. "...Sometimes I forget you're not a little girl any more. And you're far enough that all I can do is give you a phone call to see if you're okay."

Madoka closes her eyes, once again reminded how lucky she is. "I don't need to hold your hand anymore, Mama—at least, most of the time I don't." Her eyes open, and she absently swipes at her tears with her fingers. "How's Takkun doing?"

Junko groans.

"Not good?" Madoka bites her lip, wondering if she should offer to visit this weekend.

"No, he's doing fine. He's very much handling this like your Papa would."

"Then...?"

"It's not even Himawari that I'm having trouble with. It's her mother. She is such a pain in the—"

"*Mama*."

"—yes, I know. She is a—how to put it? A—very difficult woman. Kind of like that bald head from HR."

Madoka grins, feeling herself relaxing as she listens to her mother's voice.

"...Both you and Takkun are growing up."

"We are, Mama."

"...And I'm just growing old."

Madoka rolls her eyes. "You're not that old, Mama."

"Hmph, I could probably still fit in with you girls at the bar."

Madoka laughs. "First of all, Mama, me and Homura-chan still aren't old enough."

"Soon though."

"Yes," Madoka agrees. "Soon."

"I still remember you telling me how you couldn't wait to drink with me."

"That hasn't changed, Mama."

"...Don't rush into it, Madoka. You still have time."

Madoka tilts her head, "that's not what you said last time."

"Mama's starting to realize that the older you get Madoka, the older Mama also becomes."

The grin still hasn't left Madoka's face. "You're not that old, Mama."

"Please tell that to my back, Madoka!"

They share a laugh.

"Mama?"

"Hm?"

"I'm really okay; I'm old enough to take care of myself, but it doesn't mean that I won't come to you when I need help."

"You can always depend on me."

"Thank you, Mama."

"Now, since I'm still a bit wound up to continue my work, is there anything else that has happened that I should know about before I somehow find out about it on the news a few days from now?"

Madoka hesitates before answering. "Well..."

"Madoka."

"Okay." She sighs, and stands to pace around the room. "Well, so... we're not that close to the station, Mama."

"Uh huh."

"But—well, do you remember how I mentioned Homura-chan has a half-brother in Tokyo?"

"Uh huh?"

"Well, did I also mention he works—at a bar by the station?"

"Oh no."

"He—was the one that was stabbed."

"Oh no. How is he? The news mentioned he was in stable condition?"

"Yes, he's doing fine. In fact, Homura-chan saw him today."

"And how is Homura-chan?"

"Mm..." Madoka continues to pace, wondering how to summarize the past few days.

"Madoka."

"She's—she wasn't doing that well, but she's better now."

"Yeah?"

"She's... there's..." She takes a deep breath, letting it fill her lungs, before she slowly exhales. "I learned more about her that explains a lot, especially the things you pointed out."

"And?"

She stops pacing, feeling her chest tighten. "...I really like her, Mama."

"Do you, Madoka?"

Madoka nods, swallowing hard to stop her voice from cracking. "...But I'm scared, Mama."

"Of what?"

"What—if she doesn't like me? What if—" she blinks, feeling the tears well in the corner of her eyes, "what if I—ruin our friendship? I don't want to lose her, Mama."

"Mm..." Junko's voice trails off, and Madoka rubs her eyes dry as she waits for her mother's response. "That's the one thing about love, Madoka: nothing's guaranteed. But the one thing I do know, is that you won't find out unless you take that chance. You're strong; I know this, because you're my daughter. And I know that whatever happens, you won't let it ruin your friendship. Even if she pushes you away, you'll only push back even harder. You're stubborn, like Papa."

Through her tears, Madoka laughs, knowing very well who she takes after.

"Now, the choice is up to you whether or not you want to take things a step further. But—don't sell yourself short, Madoka. I think the two of you would work out really well."

"How do you know that, Mama?"

"Call it mother's intuition."

Madoka grins, and swipes at her tears. "Thank you, Mama."

"Well, I had a gut feeling that I needed to talk to you, and I'm glad it wasn't anything worse than what I thought it would be. I should be getting back to work now," Junko sighs, "but I meant it when I don't want you girls walking anywhere after dark. Those criminals are still out there, and I would appreciate it if you would set this old woman's mind at ease and lessen my gray hairs by taking the taxi home?"

"I will, Mama."

"Homura-chan too."

"I'll tell her, but—"

"Tell her I will come visit if she doesn't agree."

Madoka laughs. "I'll tell her that, Mama."

"Thank you. So, just to recap, you're okay?"

"Yes."

"Homura-chan is... okay?"

"...She will be."

"Attagirl. I'll talk to you later?"

"Of course."

"Call me if you need anything."

"I will, thank you, Mama."

"Oh, and before I forget, maybe you could give Papa a call too? He's been moping around the house after Takkun told him that he can take care of himself now. With you in Tokyo, and Takkun pushing away, Papa's been feeling lonely."

Madoka grins, unable to keep the amusement from her voice as she answers. "Sure, I'll call him right after I hang up with you. I love you, Mama."

"Love you too, Madoka."

Madoka waits for her mother to hang up, and when she hears the click, she pulls the phone away. She stares blankly at the screen as she lets her mother's words repeat in her mind.

After a moment, she moves to make her second phone call, but stops as she changes her mind. She turns, heading to her room first to change into something more comfortable.

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"...Yes, I know, Papa." She rolls her eyes, continuing to stir the pot of soup as Tomohisa continues to remind her of the dangers in the city.

"What was that, Madoka?"

She sighs, and moves closer to her phone for the speaker to catch her voice. "I said, 'yes, I know, Papa.'"

"I'm just worried about you, Madoka. Are you eating properly? Do you need me to send you and Homura-chan food? I know that finals are coming up and—"

"Papa, I'm fine. I can cook—you taught me how to cook! Plus, we could easily go out and buy food. There's things like fast food, Papa. There's a restaurant right around the corner!"

"Fast food isn't good for you, Madoka! Do you know how many calories are in one meal? Not to mention the amount of sodium and sugar! You can just give me a list of things you want to eat and Papa will whip them right up for you. Three meals for

the both of you... in a week, six meals times seven is forty two portions. If I stay up —"

Madoka sets the spatula down on a small plate, and then quickly reaches for her phone, jabbing the speaker button to bring the phone to her ear. "Papa—you don't need to cook for us, you're already busy cooking for Mama and Takkun. I can cook, Homura-chan can cook. How do you even expect to sleep if you're busy making meals for us? How would you even deliver it?"

"Tokyo isn't that far, Madoka! Isn't Sayaka-chan visiting this weekend?"

Madoka blinks. "She is. How did you know?"

"I ran into her parents the other day—please don't ever be like her and run off to a different city in the middle of the night?"

Madoka sighs, tilting her head back in exasperation, "Papaaaaaaa, I'm old enough to take care of myself! And I know you're busy with your job at the daycare. Thank you for worrying about me, but I'm doing fine. I've been here for almost a year now and I've been doing fine."

Tomohisa falls into silence, and Madoka immediately feels a stab of guilt.

"Papa? Really, I'm doing okay. And the reason why I'm able to take care of myself is because of you and Mama. I think you did a pretty good job of raising me to be independent, so you don't have to worry about me."

She hears him sigh.

"Papa?"

"Between you finding your place in Tokyo, and Takkun starting to find his own, Papa's at a loss."

She smiles, and reaches over to lower the heat on the stove to a simmer. "We're growing up Papa, but it doesn't mean that we don't need you in our lives. You'll always be our Papa."

Her smile widens when she hears him finally laugh.

"A year has passed so quickly," he murmurs, and she knows he's most likely staring out their patio door and into the garden.

"Are the tomatoes ready for harvesting yet, Papa?"

"Soon. We had some for dinner the other day."

"When I come home, I'll help you pick them."

"Papa would like that very much."

They both laugh. As Madoka opens her mouth to say something, she hears a noise from the living room. Blinking, she steps away from the stove, and walks past the breakfast bar. When she sees a familiar figure in the process of taking off her shoes, her brows furrow in slight confusion.

"Papa, Homura-chan's home, and I need to finish dinner, which I'm sure you also need to do."

"Yes, yes, Madoka. Papa can take a hint. Tell Homura-chan I say hi."

"I will."

"And if you need me to cook—"

"I won't—"

"Or anything—"

"We're fine, Papa. But I'll definitely look forward to your cooking when I come home?"

"Papa will make you anything you want! Be careful?"

"Of course, Papa. Love you."

"Love you too, Madoka."

She promptly hangs up, and when she looks over, Homura is now sitting on the couch, her book bag already set to the floor.

Madoka moves to join her. "Welcome back."

Homura turns, reacting to her voice. "...I'm back."

"You're home early?" She stops right in front of Homura, eyeing her appearance as she slips her phone back into her pocket

Homura nods, "they cancelled tutoring again."

"That's... not a good thing, is it?"

Homura shrugs, and takes a moment to settle against the sofa cushions before answering. "It's fine; their summer vacation starts soon anyways, and he seems to be doing well enough in his classes that his parents aren't pushing for extra sessions."

Madoka takes a step forward, frowning when she sees Homura closing her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Tired," Homura mumbles.

A hand covers her forehead, and she cracks one eye open to the sight of Madoka looming above her.

"I'm fine."

Only when Madoka is satisfied there's no fever, does she move her hand to gently sweep Homura's bangs to the side. "Dinner's just about ready. Get changed and I'll set the table."

Homura stares at her for a moment, before she leans back against the couch, eyes once again closing. "Why do we have to eat three meals a day? One should be enough..."

Madoka smiles, and gently taps Homura's cheek. "Go get changed, Homura-chan. All you have to do is eat; everything's already made for you."

Homura tips her body over so that she's now draped over the arm rest of the couch, her dark hair a mess around her. "Go on without me, Madoka. Save yourself."

With a grin, Madoka inches her hands closer to Homura's side.

"If you don't get up right now..." she lets her voice trail off, waiting until Homura opens her eyes to show her the consequences.

There's an involuntary squeak from Homura that only makes Madoka grin wider.

"Dinner?" she asks again, and this time a blushing Homura nods. Madoka doesn't move away, however, and Homura eyes her warily. "I still have to get you back for today, Homura-chan..."

Homura nods slowly. "You do..."

"But," Madoka pulls back, and sets her hands down to her side. "It'll be when you least expect it. Now, go get changed."

Homura sits up, and nervously starts fixing her hair into place. "...Has anyone ever told you how scary you are?"

Madoka puffs out her chest, one hand to her hip. "It runs in my blood, Homura-chan." She turns, and starts walking to the kitchen.

When she feels Homura's eyes still on her, she tilts her head back, pointedly raising an eyebrow.

"...I'm going," Homura murmurs as pushes off from the couch.

Humming lightly, Madoka enters the kitchen to finish the preparations for dinner.

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She turns over, trying to make herself comfortable. The spot next to her is empty, and if she concentrates hard enough, she's able to hear the relaxed breathing of Homura from her futon.

She turns over again, hugging Homu-chan tightly as she buries her face into soft plush.

Unlike yesterday, and the days before, there had been no hesitation as Homura had reached for her futon, and no timid request had spilled from her mouth as she unrolled her futon onto the floor.

A soft goodnight, and Madoka had stayed awake for another hour with the premise of studying, and in actuality, scribbling spirals on her notes as she zoned out.

She sighs, and closes her eyes again, trying to will herself to sleep. She's not sure how much time passes, but just as she feels the pull of the sandman, an indisguishable sound is heard, and confused, her eyes slowly open to darkness.

She blinks, waiting, but when silence greets her, she closes her eyes again. Another few seconds, before they open, and this time she sits up, her hands already moving to throw her blankets off her body.

"No...!"

She abandons Homu-chan nearby to fumble in the dark, her hands searching for the side of the bed. The touch of the edge, and she's stumbling as her feet are hurriedly planted on soft carpet.

"Y-You're—not..."

Pale moonlight lights the way as her footsteps hurry for the light switch. Light floods in, and after a few impatient blinks, she heads towards the futon—to Homura, who's fighting with an invisible enemy that only she can see.

Her knees hit the soft blankets, and she kneels next to Homura, hands set against her shoulders to shake her awake. "Homura-chan. Homura-chan!"

With a small gasp, unfocused eyes open, and Madoka feels her chest pull when she sees the tears across Homura's face.

"Homura-chan?"

"...Ma... doka? What...?" Homura blinks, but flinches when gentle fingers touch her cheek.

She draws back, face turning away in shame when she realizes she has been crying.

She sucks in a breath, her hand moving to swipe at her eyes. "I'm fine. It—" she chokes, and shakes her head. "It was nothing... Sorry—for waking you..."

Madoka sighs. She scoots closer, and Homura blinks at her confusion.

"Move over, Homura-chan."

"What—?" She jumps when Madoka slips her arms around her waist, holding her tightly.

"Lie down, Homura-chan."

"Mado—"

"Homura-chan."

Homura swallows hard, and after another timid glance, she does as told. She lowers her body, and a moment later, she feels movement as Madoka lies down next to her, the two of them now sharing a pillow.

"Mado—"

"We don't have to talk," Madoka murmurs, freeing one arm to pull the blankets around them. "It's a bit chilly tonight, and I'm just keeping you company to warm you up." The blanket is tucked in, and Homura continues to stare at Madoka's face.

Madoka turns, offering a smile that makes Homura's vision blur even further.

"It's—cold tonight," Homura repeats, voice a small whisper.

"It is, Homura-chan."

Homura reaches for the blankets, lifting it to cover her face. Wordlessly, Madoka holds her closer, letting Homura bury her face into her chest.

She threads her fingers into her hair, gently stroking her back as she cries.

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"I'm sorry," Homura mumbles, finally pulling away in embarrassment.

Madoka smiles, and brushes Homura's hair back. "I think we've both had our share of crying..."

"Ugh," Homura groans, flopping over and throwing her arm across her eyes. "Every time—I—" she shakes her head.

Madoka patiently waits for her to gather her thoughts.

"...I always think I'm over it, that it's all in the past, but every time I see them—" she cuts herself off, teeth gritting as angry tears prickle in her eyes.

"...It's okay, Homura-chan. You don't—"

"I want to—" Homura tells her as she presses a hand against her face. "I don't like being like this. I don't like how much—they still control me even after all this time. I left—I'm supposed to be stronger, but—*nothing's* changed; I'm still that weak little girl."

Madoka turns, once again reaching for Homura.

"Why—can't I let it go?" she croaks as Madoka hugs her close.

"You will, Homura-chan. You're strong—"

"I'm not—" she attempts to push away, but Madoka doesn't let go.

"You're stronger than you think you are. You will get through this, I know you can, Homura-chan."

"...What if I can't?"

Madoka gently presses a kiss to the top of Homura's head. "That's what I'm here for, Homura-chan."

"...Why?"

Madoka sighs, bumping her head against Homura's. "Because we're friends. Because I care about you."

Because—

"I'll repeat that as many times as needed to get through your thick head, Homura-chan."

Instead of replying, Madoka feels arms wrap around her as Homura finally returns their hug.

"I'm sorry," Homura murmurs.

A small exasperated sigh. "For what, Homura-chan?"

Homura pauses, obviously hearing the annoyance in Madoka's voice. "...For ruining your shirt...?" she offers quietly.

Madoka laughs softly, and hugs Homura closer. "Well, I think we're pretty even with that..." She holds her for a second longer, until the discomfort of her soaked shirt has her reluctantly pulling back. "I'll go change, and you can wash up?"

Homura nods. They both sit up, but before Madoka can stand, a hand around her wrist stops her from moving.

Homura shyly ducks her head. "...Thank you."

Madoka smiles, "you're welcome, Homura-chan."

As soon as Homura disappears into the bathroom, Madoka's smile falters. She sighs, and cradles her face in her hands.

"Homura-chan..."

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"Maybe I should just get rid of my futon," Homura jokes as she hugs Tora-kun and Amy close.

"My bed is big enough," Madoka murmurs, trying to ignore the heat that flares across her neck.

"For someone so small, you do have a pretty big bed."

Madoka responds by stretching her arms out, effectively punching Homura in the arm.

"Ow."

"Queen sized beds are nice, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her as she gives herself a mental pat on the back. "I can stretch out as much as I want to."

"If you just got rid of all your plushies on your bed back home, wouldn't you have enough empty space to stretch?"

Madoka turns, eyes searching for Homura in the darkness. She extends her hand, and smiles when Homura twitches when her side is poked.

"But then, where would my plushies sleep?" Madoka asks instead.

She hears Homura turn, no doubt a sharp retort about to leave her mouth.

"And I know you're holding Tora-kun and Amy, Homura-chan. And I've seen you tuck them in."

"...they look cold."

Madoka hums, knowing she has won this argument. She glances behind her to check the time. "Mm... it's getting late..."

"We should sleep."

Madoka nods even though she knows Homura can't see her. Before she can reach out, she feels Homura shift, and smiles to herself when Homura's hand brushes against hers.

She grips her hand tightly, squeezing it in reassurance. "Goodnight, Homura-chan."

"Goodnight, Madoka."

Madoka closes her eyes, Homura's hand still holding hers.

She's falling asleep, when she hears a light exhale.

"...Thank you," Homura whispers.

She smiles again, and presses her hand down. Without saying anything, she slides her body closer. When Homura doesn't push away, Madoka snuggles against her. It doesn't take long until they both feel the draw of slee**p.**

AN: DID YOU SEE? THE MDHM IN THE CUTE SWEATERS AND DRESSES?!

Happy pocky day; this fic has nothing to do with that.
What ever happened to 6k worded chapters?

Take care. See you all in another... few months ? Zzzzz

And, as always, thank you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter 16

With a small groan, she reluctantly opens her eyes. There's a persistent sound echoing in her ears, but instead of getting up to investigate, she buries her face deeper into her pillow, eyes closing, hoping if she ignores it, eventually it'll go away.

She's easily falling back to sleep when she's startled awake as her pillow starts moving. She makes a sound of protest, arms reaching, wrapping around it tighter to bring it back close, flush against her body.

"...Madoka...?"

"Hmmm...?" She sighs softly, but frowns when her pillow once again tries to pull away. "Nn..."

"Madoka...?"

"Hmm...?"

There's a short pause, until Madoka's eyes snap open as she realizes she's not actually holding a pillow. She quickly detaches herself from Homura's side, mumbling out an apology as she fumbles to throw off the covers. Once untangled, she's reaching over, and a moment later, the alarm abruptly stops when she slaps her hand on top of the disable button.

As silence settles in the room, a still slightly flustered Madoka sneaks a quick glance over: just a bundled lump under the blankets, with no indication that Homura has noticed.

She blushes as her old nickname springs into her mind; Homura will definitely tease her if she finds out.

Absently, she pats down her hair, and after another quick debate, she carefully rises from the bed. She slowly treads across the room, making her way to the bathroom to start her morning routine.

As she passes Homura, she walks a bit faster, and only when the door is closed behind her, does she breathe out a sigh of relief.

When the door opens and a calmer Madoka steps out, Homura is awake and has mustered enough energy to sit up, propped against the pillows. She's facing the window, absently petting Tora-kun and Amy as she waits her turn to wash her face.

Hair tie in hand, Madoka slowly approaches the bed. She takes a moment to evaluate Homura's profile. "Morning, Homura-chan." She thinks back to last night, "...how are you feeling?"

Lavender eyes shift directions, and maybe they're just a little bit swollen, or maybe it's just her imagination. "...Morning." Homura drops her gaze to her lap, fingers running over Tora-kun's fur. "I'm okay," she mumbles. She glances over, expression looking so shy that Madoka has to resist the urge to pull her into a hug.

Instead, she licks her lips nervously, and decides to change the subject. "Since I have more time today, I was thinking of making miso soup for breakfast. How does that sound?"

Homura lifts her head, just in time to watch as Madoka starts gathering her hair into a haphazard ponytail. "Miso soup?" she murmurs. "We haven't had that in a while."

Madoka nods as she flicks her ponytail back. She smiles at Homura's sleepy expression, and carefully reaches over to fix Homura's messy hair. "You can go back to sleep if you're still tired?" she tells her as she tries to brush some of the tangles away. "I can set your portion aside so you can eat it when you wake up later." She's tempted to continue, enjoying the sensation of Homura's hair through her fingers, but reluctantly, she pulls her hands back.

"Mm..." With a light shake of her head, Homura briefly closes her eyes. A second later, they reopen, and the blanket is thrown off. "I'm awake." Still sleepy, and without her glasses, she squints in Madoka's direction, "miso soup?" she repeats. "I still need to learn how to make that from you; I can't get the portions right for some reason..."

Madoka puffs out her chest, "you still have much to learn, Homura-chan. Maybe miso soup is just a little too advanced for you."

Homura sighs in mock defeat, "then, maybe I'll just have to settle with bland miso water until I'm ready."

"Or—well, m-maybe..." Madoka hides her arms behind her back, hands nervously threading together, "you'll just have to settle with—drinking my miso soup... I wouldn't mind cooking it for you..." She immediately ducks her head, struggling to fight down her blush.

Homura doesn't notice however, as she's busy tucking in Tora-kun and Amy.

"If only I were so lucky," she murmurs absently. With one final pat of the blankets, Homura glances up, giving Madoka a small smile, "what is it that they say? 'Girls who can make great miso soup will make great wives?' It makes me a bit envious."

Madoka looks away, expression suddenly sour as she mumbles something under her breath.

Homura blinks. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I'll—uhm," Madoka quickly clears her throat, "right—breakfast. I'll, uhm," she points towards the door, "I'll—get started on breakfast."

Homura tilts her head in slight confusion. Before she can poise her question, all she sees is a glimpse of red and pink, before she is left alone in the room.

She blinks again, wondering if it had been her imagination that Madoka had sounded—disappointed at something. She glances down, and brings one finger over to poke Tora-kun's plastic nose.

"What do you think about that, Tora-kun?"

Only when she realizes that a minute has passed, and she is still waiting for a reply, does she rouse herself awake. She pushes off from the bed, and moves over to the dresser to retrieve her glasses.

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As Madoka sips her soup, she imagines this scene playing out in her head for many, many more mornings to come. A smile sneaks its way to her face, and she hides it by taking another sip.

"...Your friend is visiting this weekend."

She glances over the rim of the bowl, and watches as Homura demurely slices off a small piece of tofu with her chopsticks.

"She's your friend too, Homura-chan," Madoka responds. She's done with her soup for now, and sets that bowl down.

Tofu, and a bit of rice disappears into Homura's mouth. She doesn't respond as she chews, and Madoka lifts her chopsticks to follow her example.

A moment later, "she'll be busy, with the Crimson Devil..."

Attention half on her food, Madoka nods in response. She's not as delicate as Homura is, and a larger portion of tofu is deposited into her mouth.

"This weekend..." Homura's voice trails off, and Madoka glances over curiously. Homura deliberately avoids eye contact, her pale complexion now dusted with light pink.

That sudden shyness catches Madoka off-guard. She forces away her impulse to reach for her phone, and instead places her chopsticks across her bowl as she lowers that onto the counter. When the light clack of dishware reaches Homura's ears, she finally looks up.

"Is... there something happening this weekend?" Madoka chooses her words carefully, body unconsciously tensing.

"Mm..." Homura hesitantly meets Madoka's eyes, "...you're a normal girl, right?"

Madoka blinks. There's confusion from Homura's comment, and then one eyebrow lifts in slight indignation. "Well, I would like to think I am..."

Homura coughs lightly into her hand, "right." She glances to the side again, and then sighs, body slumping. "...If, you're not too busy this weekend, would it be alright if you accompanied me to the mall?"

Curiosity now peaked, Madoka leans forward in her chair. "To the mall?" she echoes; Homura hates the mall, she knows this fact very well. "Is there something specific you're looking for?"

Breakfast now abandoned, Homura fiddles with her dish, fingers tapping the surface as she struggles to voice her thoughts.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka chews on her lower lip, growing increasingly worried. "Is there something going on this weekend?"

Homura merely sighs, and brings one hand up to readjust her glasses. "No—well, yes, but, it's not..."

Madoka watches her for a moment longer, before she responds. "...Of course I'll go with you."

Homura glances up, not for the first time surprised at the kindness that Madoka has shown her. Their eyes lock, and the encouraging smile Madoka gives her is that extra push she needs.

A deep breath, before her explanation tumbles out. "...I need to buy a birthday present."

Madoka blinks again. She turns her head, seeking the nearby clock that also displays the date.

When Homura starts speaking again, she turns back to face her.

"Keiichi-san," Homura says as she absently stares at the counter, "—he has a daughter, I think she'll be... twelve, or thirteen this year? He invited me over for her birthday party this Sunday. I don't plan to attend, but I should at least get her a present."

Madoka processes her words, adding this new tidbit of information into her mind. Curiosity brims, but she swallows that down, if just barely. "...Is there anything specific she likes?"

Here, Homura shrugs. "Clothes? Make-up? ...is she even at that age where she's interested in make-up...?" she's mumbling to herself, and Madoka gently tries to steer the conversation back.

"Is there a popular series she might like? Specific brand of clothes? Hobbies?"

Homura shakes her head. Her elbow is placed on the counter next to her bowls as she rests her chin in her hand. Her next words are said with exasperation: "Keiichi-san is no help with that; he lives with her, but he doesn't know anything about her —not that I'm surprised."

Madoka smiles, as she also knows someone who's quite oblivious to her surroundings. "Well, when I was around that age... hmm," she taps her chin, deep in thought, "...I was starting to get a bit curious with make-up... I remember asking Mama about it, and she bought me a small set to try out since she said her stuff was just a biiiit too expensive to experiment with."

Her eyes soften at the memory, but when she focuses back, she finds Homura watching her, face expressionless; the realization that Homura had other things to worry about at that age makes her memory just a bit bittersweet.

She quickly forces a smile across her face. "Well, I'll help you look for something; two heads are better than one, right?"

When Homura smiles back, Madoka feels her stomach flip flop. She quickly reaches for her chopsticks, turning back to her breakfast before she can do something she might regret.

"Thank you."

She pauses, and glances up at the quiet voice. The gentle expression on Homura's face makes the heat rise on her cheeks.

"Any time, Homura-chan." She keeps herself from grinning widely and quickly brings her bowl up to take a big gulp of soup—and almost spits it out when she chokes.

As she coughs with liquid dripping from her fingers, soft fabric touches her skin, followed by a gentle, yet firm hand on her back.

"Are you alright?"

She coughs in response, embarrassed, and maybe a little more than happy at Homura's actions.

"I'm—okay," she wheezes out.

"I'm sure." Homura's tone is sarcastic, but her hand is steady as she continues the administrations against Madoka's back.

A few more coughs, and a few more throat clears, until Madoka straightens out.

"I'm okay," she repeats, and this time her voice is no longer as strained. "Thanks, Homura-chan."

"Sure."

Homura withdraws her hand, but sticks close as she helps clean the soup from the breakfast bar. A few napkins later, she's back in her seat.

Chopsticks raised, Homura pauses before taking a bite. She can feel a pair of eyes watching her, and glances over, lavender meeting rose pink. "Just so you know, you have less than ten minutes to finish your breakfast and get ready, or else you'll need to start a brisk walk to class to avoid being late."

Madoka immediately zeroes in on the digital clock. She turns back to her breakfast, chopsticks moving a bit faster as she starts shoveling food into her mouth.

"You're going to choke again—"

Food goes down the wrong pipe, and Madoka coughs in response. She thumps her chest, trying to dislodge those grains of rice.

Hands are once again on her back: gentle, soothing, the light touch burning through her clothes—though she knows she's the only one that can feel that.

"Here's some water." A cup is pushed underneath her nose, and she accepts it with both hands.

"Thank you," she croaks, right before she takes a drink.

Homura is still absently patting her back, "I can make you some toast that you can take with you while you go get ready. It's nothing compared to your miso soup, but it's all I'm skilled for at the moment."

Finished with the water, Madoka places her cup down. She turns her head, once again seeking the clock. "Urgh."

She had spent a little too long trying to make the soup perfect today, and she fully blames Homura for that.

"I'll take that as a yes?"

Those hands on her back stop, and Madoka tilts her head back enough so that she can see Homura standing behind her, one eyebrow raised in question.

"...Yes, please."

Homura gives a mock bow, "as the lady wishes." When she straightens up and finds Madoka still watching, she gently pushes her, "you're going to be late."

"Fineeee," Madoka sighs out as she reluctantly removes herself from her chair. "I expect perfect toast when I return!"

"Of course, only the best for you."

Madoka sticks out her tongue in response, which Homura counters by pointing to the clock.

"Okay okay, I'm moving," Madoka tells her as she starts hurrying towards her room. As soon as she's far enough, she holds her hands to her face and grins to herself; she wouldn't mind a future like this at all.

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There's an emptiness that always seems to linger when Madoka leaves, especially during those mornings when they have breakfast together; she figures it's because outside of school and work, most of their days are spent with each other—at least, ever since she moved in.

She tries to imagine living alone in her own apartment, one that is similar to this one, but definitely not as extravagant.

The silence is almost stifling.

She exhales slowly, emptying her lungs as her body slouches forward. There's a brief, fleeting moment when the air feels too heavy, but she forces those thoughts away. After a small shake of her head, and then a quick glance at the clock, she decides on a short nap as she waits to take her medication.

Just as she's about to make her way to the bedroom, her phone chimes. When a familiar name greets her on the screen, she cracks a smile, and quickly moves to open the envelop.

'Safe.'

The little peace sign emoji makes her smile a bit wider. She types out a short response:

'I'm sure you texting in class is considered an out.'

Madoka's response is swift: another emoji, this time a face with a tongue sticking out.

'Fine. I'll message you after class. Text me if you need anything.'

She types out her reply, and once it sends, she continues on her way to the bedroom. Just as she enters the doorway, there's another chime from her phone. She doesn't stop moving, and when she's in front of the bed, she lowers her body onto the mattress, head straight into the pillow. Tora-kun and Amy are uneven lumps under her head, but she ignores them as she continues to stare at the ceiling.

She lies there for a few moments, but another sound from her phone has her turning her head. The device is still clutched in her hand, and she brings it close to check the newest message.

A quick skim, and she pauses when she sees a now familiar emoji at the very end. She stares at it for a few seconds, and, breath held, her fingers move to punch in the needed keystrokes. A brief pause, and then her thumb comes down, sending her newest message to Madoka.

When there's no new response, she slowly breathes out as the phone is abandoned to her side. With a bit of maneuvering, Tora-kun and Amy are gathered, and then tucked under her chin. The now familiar white ceiling is above her, and after a few slow blinks, she keeps her eyes closed.

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The weather forecast had said that today would be warmer, and she unconsciously pulls at her jacket sleeves, trying to air out the gathering heat. The walk to campus

feels longer today, and by the time she's crossing the bridge on campus, she's regretting not wearing a lighter jacket.

High temperatures and low motivation eventually slows down her normally brisk pace, but despite the almost uncomfortable warmth, she's not in a hurry to go to her class just yet.

Her hands automatically slip into her jacket pocket, and she pulls out her phone with the premise of checking the time. Using her body to block the sun, her eyes flicker to the top of the screen, and she's slightly disappointed at the absence of any new notifications. A quick glance at the clock, and then her phone is slipped back into her pocket as she slowly continues on her way.

When she reaches the closest building, she veers towards the shaded areas, almost sighing in relief at the transition to the slightly cooler temperature; maybe she'll have a salad for dinner tonight to try and offset the heat.

As she tries to remember what vegetables they have left in the refrigerator, her pocket suddenly buzzes. She hesitates, but forces her hand to pull out her phone. There's hope it's from Madoka, but she's wary in case it isn't.

It's neither Madoka, nor is it from Keiichi.

She frowns slightly as she reads the message. With a sigh, she proceeds to type out a short response. When she's done, the send button is pressed a bit harder than usual; the only sign of her slight irritation. She absently stares at her hand, already making quick calculations in her head.

After a moment, she unlocks her phone, and her finger moves straight for the calculator. Eyebrows furrowed, she continues to add and subtract, manipulating the numbers until they're the ones she wants—or is as close as she can get them.

"That should work," she murmurs to herself. With a nod, she's about to lock her phone when it buzzes again, and a familiar name flashes across the screen.

Her mood brightens, and with no hesitation, she reads the message.

'It's so hot today; there's still some tofu leftover from breakfast, huh? I think I'll make some tofu salad tonight.'

The coincidence is uncanny, and she smiles to herself as she tells Madoka this, 'I was just thinking about having salad for dinner.'

As the message sends, she checks the time, and is slightly surprised to see that classes will soon begin. She takes a wary glance to the sunlight, and with another sigh, forces herself to exit the shade.

She squints at the brightness just as the phone buzzes once more. Blinking quickly, she pauses to check the newest message, using her hand to cover the washed out screen.

'Ehehe, we both have similar tastes. This is probably why we get along so well.'

There's something about Madoka's words that stops her in her tracks. She rereads the message several times, before the phone is pulled close to her chin as she tries to think of a response. Her gaze absently wanders as she searches for a way to convey her words.

The campus is bustling as students cut across, the bright sunlight lighting their way as they make their way to their designated building. It reminds her that she should also do the same. She slowly starts moving again, though half her attention is still on her phone, and on the message that needs a reply.

After another minute, she gives up. She settles for typing out a simple message, and as soon as it sends, her phone is pocketed as she quickly rushes to class.

Just as she pulls open the double doors, another notification goes off, but she continues inside; she reaches the classroom with a minute to spare.

Her usual spot is occupied, and she descends the shallow steps, making her way to one of the empty desks at the very front. Her shoulder bag is slipped off as she takes a seat, and then her notebook and pen are pulled out in preparation for the lecture.

When the professor flickers on the projector, she pulls her phone from her pocket, keeping it hidden under her desk. As the professor starts talking, she cups her hand around the screen to block the light, and quickly reads her newest message.

Her lips twitch in amusement, but when the classroom dims into darkness, it reminds her that she should be paying attention. She types out a quick reply, and ends it with a familiar emoji. Her phone is then silenced, notifications and all, before it disappears into her pocket. Pen in hand, for the next two hours, she focuses on her class, though occasionally she has to stop herself from checking on her phone.

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With a sigh of relief, she pushes open the apartment door, pausing in the doorway as she feels the cooler, controlled air from the apartment drift by.

"Ahh, it's so hot today," she mutters to herself as she finally steps inside, eager to get away from the heat.

Weather had her changing her plans to visit the coffee shop, but there's some ice, and a packet of tea with her name on it that she's been looking forward to since she had started the walk back home.

The door is quickly shut behind her, and after a scan to where a familiar pair of boots are nowhere to be found, her shoes are neatly stored, before she steps onto plush carpet. Through her stockings, she can feel the cool material underneath her feet.

A plastic bag swings in her hands, and humming, she heads to the kitchen to deposit the items into the refrigerator. Once done, she pads over to the bedroom to change into something more comfortable.

Jersey donned and one large cup of iced barley tea later, she settles against the couch, knowing she has a few hours before she'll need to start on dinner. She's reluctant to study, but eventually she forces herself to grab her backpack off the floor. She rifles through her folders, until she finds the specific set of papers that she has been searching for.

Just staring at it seems to plummet her mood, and with a puff of air to her bangs, she falls back on the cushions, arms above her as the papers are held in between her hands. There are numerous red marks scribbled on the first page, and she knows the back and next page look the same.

She groans loudly and shuts her eyes, letting her arms fall to her sides with the papers crumpled in her right hand.

She can hear herself breathing slowly, and if she concentrates, she can hear the vents as the fans circulate air.

Time slowly ticks by, and she sighs again, one arm moving to cover her eyes.

"...I should get up," she mumbles to herself. She thinks back to her score, and groans again. "...Homura-chan won't be home until later..."

A few more seconds pass, before she suddenly sits up.

"But—I shouldn't just rely on her; Homura-chan has her own tests to study for! I shouldn't distract her too much."

Now motivated, she reaches for her backpack, this time to pull out her books and notes.

She briefly reviews her test, and then glances to her book. The back of her pencil taps her knee, and after a few more observations, she decides to start at the equations that had given her the most trouble.

Just as she thumbs open the book to the specific chapter, a familiar ringtone starts playing. She unconsciously checks the time, and immediately fights back the disappointment, knowing the off-chance that Homura's class has ended early will be highly unlikely. She grabs her phone, and the name on the screen has her blinking. She quickly jabs the receive button, before bringing the phone to her ear.

"Hitomi-chan?"

"Madoka-san."

She smiles. "It's nice to hear your voice again, Hitomi-chan. How are you? Isn't it —" she pauses, trying to calculate the time difference, "...super late there?" her voice is puzzled, and Hitomi responds to her tone with a light laugh.

"Yes, it is quite late; in fact, it's early morning. I'm finishing up my studies for tonight, and I wanted to reach you at a good time."

They have exchanged a few emails over the months, but phone calls are definitely less frequent.

"Is something wrong?" Madoka asks, this time worried.

"No—" Hitomi cuts herself off, and sighs. "Well, in a way... I could never really get anything past you, huh, Madoka-san?"

Madoka sits back against the cushions, bracing herself for whatever it was. "Hitomi-chan?"

"It's—nothing really. It's... I'll be home for summer break once finals are over... would you, ah, like to meet up?"

Madoka blinks. She sits up in surprise. "What! Of course we can meet up, Hitomi-chan! Though," she deflates slightly, "I'll only be home for a week, and then I'll be taking summer classes."

"Ahh—"

"But," Madoka interrupts her before she can respond, "if you want, maybe you can visit me here?"

"In Tokyo?"

"Yes! You did say how you wanted to see the apartment, didn't you? You could come over and stay the night. Maybe we could invite Sayaka-chan too and have a sleepover!"

"...That sounds like a wonderful idea, Madoka-san. If it's not too much trouble—"

"Of course not, Hitomi-chan! I'll—" she pauses, thoughts suddenly going to a certain dark-haired individual, "...I'll mention it to Homura-chan; as long as there's enough warning, she should be okay..."

"And, how is Akemi-san?" Hitomi's voice is suddenly higher and teasing.

Madoka blushes, knowing she had walked into that one. She pulls her knees close to her chest, one hand now absently playing with the fabric of her pants. "She's—" her voice trails off as she swallows heavily, "...she's okay."

"...Hmmmm, well, I won't pry, but if you ever need to talk, you can call me whenever."

Madoka smiles. "Thank you, Hitomi-chan."

Hitomi clears her throat, "and, how is Sayaka-san?"

"Sayaka-chan?" Madoka echoes. "Mm... she's—" she sighs, "doing better...?"

"...Kamijou-kun?"

Madoka sighs again. "Yeah." She gestures helplessly, even though she knows Hitomi can't see. "He's just so—and Sayaka-chan's so—" she shakes her head.

"...frustrating?" Hitomi offers.

"Yes! She's..." she pauses, tapping her knee with her fingers as she debates whether or not to tell Hitomi about Sayaka's decision.

"Kamijou-kun called me earlier," Hitomi blurts out suddenly.

Madoka blinks. "What?"

Hitomi doesn't immediately reply, and Madoka can hear shuffling on the line. After another moment, Hitomi finally answers, "he asked for my advice, on what to get Sayaka-san for their anniversary."

"...He did?"

"He's also going home for summer vacation—at least for a few weeks."

Madoka bites her lip, not liking where this is going. "...I know, Sayaka-chan mentioned it."

"...I see."

Confused at her tone, Madoka tilts her head. "...Hitomi-chan?"

"He seemed quite set on jewelry." Hitomi's voice is quiet, and Madoka can tell there's something she's not saying.

"Did he also mention that he remembered the wrong date for their anniversary?"

There's a pause, before Hitomi's light, twinkling laugh is heard. "...He did the same thing to me as well." Her words end with a sigh. "...I have evidence to believe that Kamijou-kun..."

"Kamijou-kun...?"

"...Might be thinking about asking Sayaka-san for her hand in marriage."

Madoka's mouth drops open, and there's a few seconds of silence, until she finally finds her voice. "What?!" Numerous questions cycle in her mind, but the one that stands out easily rolls off her tongue, "why?"

"Mm... after it didn't work out for Kamijou-kun and I, we still remained friends—maybe that failed relationship made us closer? It was understandable that Sayaka-san would react that way she did; I apologize for getting you caught up in the middle of all that."

Madoka frowns, leaning back into her seat, "that's all in the past, Hitomi-chan. Besides, Sayaka-chan forgave you, remember?"

Hitomi continues, ignoring Madoka's interjection. "Before graduation, he confided to me that he believed Sayaka-san to be 'the one.'"

Madoka feels irritation bubble from her chest when she remembers what had happened around senior year. "But... he left to study abroad—he didn't even tell her until he had already finalized his plans!"

"He wanted to make sure—"

"So he left her, and he wants her to wait for him until he's finally satisfied with living his own dream, before he'll return?" Madoka snaps back.

"...He's awful, isn't he?"

Madoka rubs her forehead, thinking about the drama in middle school that had partially spilled into high school. "...Sayaka-chan's going to break up with him. Or, at least she plans to."

"How is she doing?"

"Okay... though..." she tilts her head when she remembers the Crimson Devil, "...I think, she might be able to get over him fairly quickly..."

"Oh?" Hitomi's voice seems to brim with curiosity.

"Well, there's nothing going on right now, since Sayaka-chan is technically still with Kamijou-kun. But... I think it was the first time I saw her interested in someone else other than him."

"My... they must be quite the character then."

"Kind of..."

"...I'm glad, Madoka-san."

"Eh? About what?"

"That—even though we're all on our own different paths now, we're still able to talk like we used to."

"What? Of course we would, Hitomi-chan! Just because you're all the way over there, and I'm over in Tokyo, and Sayaka-chan is in Mitakihara, it doesn't mean that we're no longer friends!"

Hitomi's soft laugh is heard, "thank you, Madoka-san. I did call to give warning of Kamijou-kun's intentions, but truthfully, I've been feeling a little bit homesick; the language barrier is still quite limiting, and things here are different than what I'm used to. It's comforting to know that you won't leave me for your new 'friend.'"

Madoka feels her face flushing at Hitomi's teasing. "Hitomi-chan!"

"It's also nice knowing that you haven't changed that much at all. When I visit, you'll need to tell me the details."

"...maybe," Madoka mumbles, picturing Hitomi's eyes most likely shining at the prospect of gossip.

"And," Hitomi continues, "maybe, I'll tell you a bit of my own details..."

Madoka's eyes widen. "What? Who? What are they like? Is it one of your classmates?"

"Who knows~"

"Hitomi-chan!"

"Oh my, look at the time; I have class in the morning, and I need to at least get a few hours in, otherwise I won't be able to function."

"Wait—"

"I'll send over a picture later."

"With more information?"

"Mm, maybe."

Madoka sighs, and her back hits the cushions. "Then, for sure when you visit?"

"Definitely."

Madoka smiles, knowing that Hitomi is most likely doing the same. "It was nice talking with you, Hitomi-chan."

"Likewise, Madoka-san."

"Good luck with your studies."

"You too."

"You'll send the picture?"

"Yes. In turn, will you send me a picture as well?"

Madoka blinks, "of?"

"This mysterious character that has captured our Sayaka-san's attention."

"I don't have one right now, but—oh! I'm probably going to see them this weekend; I'll try to snap a picture then?"

"I can wait. I really wouldn't mind chatting more, but..."

"I understand, Hitomi-chan. I'll message you later—"

"Yes. Please send my regards to Sayaka-san?"

"I will. We'll plan more later for your visit?"

"Of course. Oh, and one last thing, Madoka-san."

Madoka is reaching for her book, phone held to her ear by her shoulder, "hm?"

"I understand how distracting it must be to live with Akemi-san, but you should put business before pleasure and study."

Madoka sputters and promptly drops her phone. When she places the speaker back to her ear, Hitomi is still laughing on the line.

"Hitomi-chan!"

"Goodnight, Madoka-san~"

"Wait—" There's a click, and Madoka pulls her phone away to see the flashing icon, before her home screen replaces it, signalling the end of the call.

She sighs, one hand held to her warm cheek.

"I'll get you back, Hitomi-chan."

Eventually, her embarrassment fades, and the smile drops from her face as she remembers Sayaka's situation. She'll have to say something this weekend, and it's definitely not something she's looking forward to. With another groan, she's back to lying on the couch, and when she registers the crumpling of paper, she groans even louder.

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Her eyes slowly open, and she's left blinking at what she vaguely recognizes to be the ceiling of her apartment. She turns her head, and soft cushion underneath shifts. With a yawn, she realizes she had fallen asleep.

She lies there for another minute, before she sits up. Fabric slides down: the ends of a light blanket now pooled around her arms. She blinks, and gently runs her hands over the soft surface, wondering if she had grabbed it right before her nap.

It's then that she realizes there's a gentle, almost rhythmic chopping sound coming from the kitchen. Fully awake now, she hastily folds the blanket, leaving the bundle on the couch when she's done. She stands, and starts moving across the living room, unconsciously fixing her hair, fingers threading through the tangles to smooth them out.

She reaches the kitchen, and just as her mouth opens, Homura looks up from the cutting board.

"You're awake."

"I am," Madoka agrees. She steps closer towards the breakfast bar, and tiptoes to peer past it for a glimpse of what Homura is cutting.

"Did you sleep well?" Homura turns her attention back to her work, and Madoka watches as she continues to methodically chop a small portion of lettuce.

"Sort of," Madoka murmurs. She glances around, finding the projection screen placed by the toaster oven. "You're back early?"

"Mmhmm. Tutoring was cancelled."

"Again?"

The chopping stops, and Homura uses her finger to wipe the blade clean of a few strands of stray lettuce. "Summer vacation starts soon, and they're enrolling him in cram school. They can't afford both, so they decided that since he seems to be doing well in most of his subjects, he won't need any more help until proven otherwise."

Madoka frowns in response as the knife once again starts moving. "Will... I mean, will you be okay? With—that...?"

Homura's hand stills. The held knife is turned, and then gently lowered to the chopping board. She glances up, and Madoka stares at her, trying to read her expression.

After a moment, Homura forms her response. "Yes—I should be fine. I already have the job at the computer lab, and I can probably find a few people to tutor since finals are so close."

The reassurance only makes Madoka feels a little better, "but..."

Homura peers at her briefly, before she starts to fill a bowl with the chopped lettuce. "I already calculated the numbers, and pushed some here and there; honestly, if rent here wasn't so cheap—" she says this with a frown that Madoka catches, "I would probably be close to the red. Manageable, of course, but not without a few sacrifices..."

"Then—"

Homura holds up a finger, but brings it back down when she notices a piece of lettuce sticking to it. She pulls that away, and then drops it into the waiting bowl. "I have a budget, and money set aside in case this happens. And, don't worry, I have extra set aside for our trip as well."

Madoka opens her mouth, but closes it when she feels her stomach churn with guilt. "That's..."

Bowl now filled, Homura turns to Madoka, already having an idea of what she's thinking. She reaches for the nearby dishcloth to wipe her hands dry.

"...Do you really think I'm that bad at managing my money, Madoka?"

"Eh?" Madoka blinks at her question. She quickly registers Homura's words, and shakes her head. "No, of course not."

Homura rests her hands on the counter, hunched over slightly as she leans forward. She gives Madoka a small smile, "a vacation sounds nice—even one just for the weekend..." Her gaze grows distant, and Madoka realizes that the trip is just as important to Homura as it is to her.

She forms a smile on her face, if only to respond to Homura's sudden quietness. "It does, Homura-chan."

Homura's eyes shift, and when lavender focuses her way, Madoka is once again drawn in by that gentle shade.

It lasts only for a moment, before Homura pushes off from the counter, "dinner will be ready soon."

"Mmm." Madoka casts a look around, and when her sight falls onto the refrigerator, she's suddenly reminded, "oh, I made some tea earlier, we can have some for dinner since we didn't have coffee this morning."

Homura nods, "I saw. I was going to make some iced coffee, but changed my mind when I saw the pitcher. I took some without your permission; it was delicious."

Madoka rolls her eyes in fake exasperation. "I knew you would take some. I deliberately made more. You're welcome."

"Thank you," Homura tells her as she briefly glances up from her work. "It's a good idea though, having something different. Supposedly, certain teas have more caffeine than coffee. Since it's starting to warm up, we could rotate between that, and I also wanted to try making that cold brewed coffee I mentioned before..." She looks up, lips twitching, and Madoka braces herself for Homura's next comment. "Maybe if we prep some things the night before, it'll give you more time so you won't be late in the mornings."

Madoka sticks out her tongue. "Ha ha, Homura-chan." She tries to look offended, but she's smiling too widely, enjoying their usual banter.

As their conversion lulls, the slow, rhythmic chopping continues. Still feeling a bit sleepy, Madoka places her arms on the breakfast bar, using them as a pillow to support her head. She closes her eyes, listening as the chopping stops as Homura moves around the kitchen.

"Madoka?"

"Hmm...?"

"I'll wake you when it's almost done?"

"Okay," she murmurs. She peeks through lidded eyes, finding Homura once again in front of the cutting board. She hadn't noticed it earlier, but she can recognize the contrasting brown straps against Homura's usual grey: Homura is wearing one of her aprons, specifically the one shaped like a bear.

She buries her face in her arms, smiling widely to herself.

Her eyes close again, and she breathes in slowly as Homura continues to prep their dinner. This kind of future wouldn't be bad either.

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With the last dish placed to dry on the dish rack, Madoka dusts off her hands. She turns to Homura, who is drying her hands with a clean dishcloth.

"Thanks for making dinner tonight, Homura-chan."

Homura shakes her head, and drapes the cloth over the edge of the counter to let it air dry. "I should cook more instead of making you cook all the time."

Madoka pouts, "but I like cooking."

"Mm, I like your cooking too," Homura responds almost immediately. She misses the grin that flashes across Madoka's face as she turns to grab her cup from the counter. "But, it's not fair to have you cook most of our meals; it should be more evenly distributed."

Madoka raises an eyebrow, eyes trailing Homura as she moves to fill her cup with water. "Knowing you, you'd probably eat salad everyday."

The faucet is turned on, and trickling water fills their ears. "...Salad is healthy."

"It's missing sustenance, like protein because you'd most likely eat it plain." Madoka's voice is dry, and she reaches over to poke Homura's shoulder with one finger. "Plus, we already discussed this before, remember? Everything else is

pretty even; we split the groceries and the chores... and there's some things around the apartment that you help with, and other things I can do."

Cup filled and water off, Homura takes a sip as she mulls this over. She pulls her cup away, and lowers it to the counter. She stares at the water, watching as it settles and evens out. "...I don't do that much... enough, really." She absently taps the side of her cup, disturbing the surface as it lightly ripples.

Madoka frowns, and places a hand on Homura's arm, drawing her attention back up. "You do more than enough. If anything, I should feel guilty for always having you tutor me all the time, especially considering you have your own studies to worry about."

"I don't mind," Homura tells her. "Our classes aren't too different, and it serves as a good review."

"But—"

Homura surprises her with a small smile, "this will just continue in circles, won't it?"

Madoka finds herself smiling as well. "Probably."

Homura sighs, but more in defeat. She glances to Madoka briefly, "if you ever want me to pitch in more for rent, I'll understand."

Madoka nods in acknowledgement, knowing that money, and Homura's pride is a rather touchy subject. "Sure, Homura-chan," she agrees easily, "I'll tell you if it ever happens."

Though she knows it won't.

"Mm, speaking of tutoring..." Homura raises an eyebrow at Madoka, "would you like me to help you with your practice test?"

Madoka blinks, but she realizes she left her test out before she fell asleep. "...You saw?"

Instead of the usual teasing that she's expecting, Homura once again fidgets with the cup of water in her hands. "I'm sorry, it's probably my fault. With Satoshi and everything happening, you couldn't study as much. It's—"

Madoka interrupts her apologies with a sigh. "Even if I had studied more, I doubt my score would be any higher." She pats Homura's arm again, earning her a curious look. "If anything, it's only because you tutored me that I was able to get more than half right." She pauses, and after a quick check on the time, she turns

back to Homura. "If you aren't too busy, could you go over a few sections with me?"

"Of course. I don't mind at all."

Madoka smiles, and leans forward to give Homura a hug. She stiffens, and Madoka waits until she relaxes. She savours Homura's warmth for a little longer, and then she finally pulls away.

"Thank you, Homura-chan. Let me use the bathroom first, and then we'll start?"

Homura nods. "Sure."

"Be right back!" Madoka says as she makes her way to the hallway.

Homura watches her until she's out of sight. Past the living room, and when Madoka is gone, she reaches for her cup. She stares at it briefly, before she brings it up to take another sip. She absently stares across the rim, thoughts jumping back and forth, until she finds herself thinking about Madoka once more.

"Homura-chan!"

Madoka's panicked voice has her quickly placing her cup down. "Madoka?" she calls out as she steps around the breakfast bar. "What's wrong?"

"Bathroom!"

Slightly confused and apprehensive, Homura takes wide strides as she rushes to the hallway.

"Madoka?" she calls out to her again, trying to pinpoint which bathroom Madoka had gone to.

"Hurry!"

Madoka's voice is to her left, and she makes a hurried beeline towards the slightly opened door.

"Mado—"

There's a yelp, followed by the crash of something plastic, right before the door is thrown open.

"Hey—" Madoka tackles Homura, forcing her to take a few steps back as she tries to catch her balance. Hands grip her tightly, and all she sees is pink as Madoka pushes against her, body twisted as her full attention is stuck on the opened door.

Homura peers over Madoka, trying to figure out what she's looking at, but before she can see anything, Madoka is screaming again, and she feels herself being shoved to the side as Madoka tries to avoid something.

"Mado—"

"SPIDER!"

"Where—"

"Move, Homura-chan!"

Madoka is suddenly cowering behind her, one hand pointed to the floor as a large black spider crawls across the carpet towards Homura's foot.

Homura jumps in surprise, bumping into Madoka who's still behind her.

"Do something, Homura-chan!"

The spider suddenly zigzags, and they both eye it warily as it fits itself into the small crevasse between the carpet and wall.

"...I think it was missing a leg."

Madoka smacks her arm.

"Ow?"

"Don't just admire it!"

"It was just an observation."

"Homura-chan!"

"...Uhm, let me get the vacuum." She tries to move away, but Madoka is still holding onto her. "Madoka? Could you please let go?"

Madoka wraps her arms tighter around Homura's waist. "What if it moves while you're getting the vacuum?"

"It's possible."

"Ugh."

"I'll be quick—you stay here and make sure it doesn't go anywhere?"

Reluctantly, Madoka finally lets go. "Okay."

"I'll be right back," Homura murmurs as she heads to the living room to retrieve the vacuum from the storage closet.

As she waits, Madoka kneels, eyes fixated on the black spot that can be seen against the lighter coloured carpet. She's still staring when Homura returns with the small, portable vacuum in her hand.

"Is it still there?"

Madoka glances over when Homura joins her side, "uh huh."

After a small bit of panic from Madoka when the spider darts close to her legs, the spider is successfully caught. Homura watches as it crawls around the clear dust bin, trying to find an opening in the enclosure.

"What are you going to do with it?" Madoka asks as she peeks over Homura's shoulder. She shudders when she sees the spider make it halfway up the plastic wall, before it tumbles down.

"I guess release it?"

Still carrying the vacuum, Homura starts walking towards the front door as Madoka follows behind her. Once the door is unlocked and outdoor slippers are adorned on her feet, Homura makes her way outside as Madoka falls back. It's a clear night, and the moonlight blends in with the outside lighting, casting shadows around her as she shuffles her way towards the railing. She squints, and scans the container for the moving black dot. Confirmation, and with a light twist, the dust tray is removed from the vacuum.

"Don't release it so close, Homura-chan," Madoka calls out to her from the door.

Homura blinks, but does as told and walks closer to the stairs. When she reaches them, she glances over, and when she sees movement that she assumes is a nod from Madoka, she flips the container over. The spider is released, and with another twist, the tray is returned to the vacuum, before Homura starts walking back to the apartment.

As she approaches the door, Madoka eyes her suspiciously. "Is it gone?"

"Yes." Homura tilts the vacuum closer, giving her a view of the empty dust tray.

Madoka sighs in relief, "good."

They reenter the apartment, closing and locking the door behind them.

As Homura places the slippers back, she glances to Madoka, "you know what they say about spiders—that they're more afraid of us then we are of them."

"It doesn't make them any less scary, Homura-chan."

"Mm," Homura replies, and starts walking towards the closet to put the vacuum back. When she's done and the door is closed, she finds Madoka now leaning against the back of the couch, obviously pouting.

Homura's lips quirk up in amusement, and she walks over to join her. "Well, it's not like I can't understand; I was bad with spiders too when I was younger."

Madoka perks at this tidbit of information, pushing off the couch when she sees Homura approaching. "You were?" She narrows her eyes, suddenly suspicious. "You don't seem to have much trouble with them though."

"Hmm." Homura absently brings her hand up to brush her hair back. She looks to the side, "I guess, there were other things to be afraid of that it didn't seem rational to fear something so small."

"Homura-chan..." Madoka steps closer, hands reaching for her.

Homura clears her throat, regretting her words when she sees how worried Madoka looks. "I don't mind taking care of the spiders, but what will you do about them when I'm not here? I won't..." her voice trails off when Madoka suddenly grabs the sleeve of her jacket. She's not looking her way however, and she's now frowning. "Madoka?"

Madoka remains quiet, lips pressed into a thin line.

"Uhm, I meant—I won't be home all the time...? Plus, in a few years, we'll be graduating, and—"

Rose pink swivels her way, this time looking angry.

Homura swallows the rest of her response. She clears her throat again, "...didn't you need to use the bathroom...? And, you wanted me to help you study...?"

After another long stare, Madoka finally relents. Her hand drops back to her side, and she moves to start walking to the hallway. Homura waits until she's out of earshot, before she releases a sigh of relief. When she doesn't hear the sound of the door close, she looks over, and stands up straighter when she sees Madoka glaring at her from the doorway of the bathroom. She averts her eyes, and brings her hand up to once again fiddle with her hair.

The door finally shuts close, and she sighs again. She allows herself a few seconds to relax, before she turns to the kitchen to retrieve her cup of water.

When Madoka walks back into the living room, Homura is now seated on the couch. There's a book sitting in her lap, with sheets of paper marked up in red resting on top.

Madoka winces at the reminder. A few quick steps, and she drops heavily into the empty space right beside Homura, disturbing the test and making it fly up from the displaced air.

Homura catches it, but freezes when she feels Madoka lean against her. She glances over just as Madoka places her head on her shoulder.

"Madoka?"

Instead of replying, Madoka reaches for the paper. She points to one of the problems. "Can you go over this one first, Homura-chan?"

Homura blinks, but when Madoka remains leaning against her, she realizes that she won't be moving anytime soon. "Uhm, sure... Just let me get a pencil—"

"I'll get it," Madoka cuts her off and sits up. She retrieves her backpack from the floor, and a few seconds later, she deposits her notebook and pencil into Homura's lap. The bag is haphazardly left leaning against the couch, and she reattaches herself to Homura's side. "There you go, Homura-chan."

"...Thank you," Homura murmurs. She moves to flip open the notebook, but before she can, Madoka suddenly snatches it from her hands.

"Wrong one! Sorry!"

Homura blinks, hands still held out. A different notebook is offered, and she stares as Madoka keeps her face turned away.

"H-Here you go, Homura-chan." Madoka glances over, before she looks away again.

"Thank you..." Homura hesitates to open the notebook. She deliberately moves slowly, and after a few moments where she re-evaluates Madoka's demeanor, she deems it safe, and proceeds to flip open the cover. "So, for this problem..."

As Homura starts rattling off her explanation, Madoka slips her hands around Homura's arm, hugging it close as she makes herself more comfortable.

She smiles to herself when Homura eventually relaxes. She concentrates on that quiet voice, and tries to follow along as Homura scribbles out the answers.

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"I'm going to turn off the lights now."

"Sure."

Homura is already lying in bed, and a few seconds later, her eyes are readjusting as darkness floods the room. Madoka's phone shines her way briefly, and she closes her eyes in response. The bed shifts and bounces, and the blankets are pulled up, before they fall into place to cover them both.

The scent of strawberries tickle her nose, and she can feel the warmth from Madoka as she draws in close.

Madoka sighs in content, and Homura opens her eyes, this time refocusing on the barely visible figure lying next to her.

"Guess this will be my last day sleeping here," Homura murmurs as the urge to say something takes over.

Madoka shifts, and Homura blinks in response as she sees the glow of rose pink reflecting in the moonlight.

"What? Why?"

Homura holds Tora-kun and Amy close, and though she's sure the darkness provides cover, she closes her eyes. "Miki Sayaka is visiting tomorrow—doesn't she usually share the bed with you?"

"Oh." Madoka sounds disappointed, and Homura reopens her eyes, slightly curious.

"I agree, I'd rather her not visit at all either..."

A hand comes down, and Homura jumps slightly at how accurate Madoka is at hitting her arm, even in the dark.

"Homura-chan."

"Ow."

"...Sayaka-chan can sleep on the couch. She'll understand anyways. Plus... I know you always complain about her snoring; this way you can get some sleep and we can isolate her in the living room."

"That sounds... really nice, actually."

Madoka smiles and gives herself a mental pat on the back.

"But..."

Madoka turns, and she's sure she can see Homura staring at her.

"If you want your bed back, that's fine too."

Madoka rolls her body over so that she's now lying face down. She slides her arms underneath her pillow, and hugs it close. After a few seconds, she turns her head towards Homura, "...this kind of reminds me of the first time you slept over." She suddenly grins to herself, "you were so nervous."

Homura coughs, obviously embarrassed. "...I couldn't help it; I had never stayed over at a friend's house before."

Madoka hums. "Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"I'm really glad I met you."

Silence, but Madoka knows that Homura is mostly likely trying form an appropriate response.

"...What's this, all of a sudden?"

Madoka closes her eyes, letting the memories wash over her. "Around the time I met you, I was starting to get really homesick; there I was, in Tokyo... I was barely scraping by in my classes, and the only people I talked to were the cashiers at the market, or maybe to ask someone for directions. I was calling home every night, enough that Mama was starting to get worried."

She releases a puff of air into her bangs.

"But, I remembered her advice, that I should go out there and try something new."

Underneath the covers, and she reaches for Homura's hand, knowing she's holding Toka-kun and Amy close. Homura starts at her touch, but she catches on quickly,

and fits her hand to Madoka's. Unable to convey her own feelings, she squeezes Madoka's hand.

"What made you choose Tokyo, anyways?" She quickly back pedals, trying to explain herself, "not that you couldn't—just, Miki Sayaka stayed in Mitakihara, and your family is there. Why didn't you stay?"

"Mm," Madoka absently plays with Homura's fingers, feeling how thin and bony they are. "I guess... maybe it was because they were there? Both Mama and Sayaka-chan are strong; I guess... I wanted to see if I could be strong too." She breathes out slowly, "though, that didn't work out too well, and even now, I'm still depending on you, too."

Madoka finds her hand now held by Homura's. "You may not be as aggressive like your mother, or as confrontational as Miki Sayaka, but you have a different kind of strength. If anything... I'm the one that's glad to have met you. I—"

Madoka moves closer and draws her hand away only to slip her arms around Homura's waist, silencing her with a strong hug. "Then, the both of us are glad we met."

Homura inhales, feeling her heart thump loudly as Madoka continues to hold her. "...Yes."

Madoka yawns as her eyes suddenly feel heavy. "Maybe we should get some sleep?" She snuggles closer.

"...We should. Uhm."

"Yes, Homura-chan?"

"...Are you finally admitting to your baby koala habits?"

Madoka is glad the darkness covers her blush as she thinks back to this morning. "...W-Well, this way, there won't be any surprises when I wake up holding you? Relax, Homura-chan, it's hard to sleep when you're so stiff."

Homura sighs, and tries to relax her body.

"Better," Madoka murmurs softly, already sounding like she's succumbing to sleep.

Homura remains staring at the ceiling, listening as Madoka's breathing evens out. Madoka holding her makes her feel safe, and the sound slowly lulls her to sleep. She closes her eyes.

Unconsciously, her arms loop around Madoka, and she pulls her closer. She mumbles something under her breath, right before sleep claims he**r.**

AN: In these trying times, let the MDHMs soothe the soul :"(

Also... oh no, an update; for sure no one was waiting for this... Thank you to whomever(?) is still reading/reviewing; even though I don't respond, I do read the reviews, and sometimes they remind me I should update more often... (actually writing though... is a different story...)

Hope all is well, or that eventually it'll be well. Until next time.

Chapter 17

As a familiar song starts playing, one figure slowly stirs awake, while another figure reacts by hugging the waking figure tighter.

Vision unfocused, Homura stares blankly at the ceiling, wondering if she is starting to get used to waking up like this.

With a sigh, she somehow musters enough energy to move her hand, placing it on Madoka's shoulder to wake her up.

"Madoka? Madoka."

Madoka grumbles in response, still clinging to Homura as she haphazardly throws one arm out, hand blindly seeking fabric. She registers the feel of cloth, and after bunching her fingers closed, she manages to pull the blankets over both their heads. When Homura freezes in response, Madoka exhales softly as she slowly sinks back to sleep.

Homura blinks, eyes now adjusting to the sudden darkness. Trapped under the covers, there's only a subtle difference between eyes opened or closed. If not for the muffled alarm in the background, she could easily pretend it's still night.

It's merely a test of her patience, and it isn't much longer until she lifts the covers off. The air is suddenly cooler, noise suddenly louder. She takes in a deep breath as her eyes readjust. Breathing out, she redoubles her efforts, hoping this time she'll be able to wake Madoka up.

"Madoka. Madoka?"

No response.

"Madoka."

"Nn..." Madoka turns her head, using Homura's body to block out the light.

Just as Homura's deciding whether or not to utilize her newest strategy to wake the sleeping girl, another louder, more jarring sound joins the chorus.

The cacophony of Madoka's alarm and ringtone succeed where Homura could not; Madoka pushes away from Homura, eyes slowly opening in confusion.

"...Homura-chan...?"

"I think someone's calling you," Homura tells her, voice quiet, and slightly hoarse from sleep.

Madoka rubs her eye sleepily, and after another moment, she finally seems to wake. She sits up abruptly, throwing the blankets off as she moves to step down from the bed.

Homura sighs in relief when the alarm stops. She relaxes against her pillows, keeping one eye open as she watches Madoka walk to her dresser.

The ringtone cuts off before Madoka can pick up. Just as she is about to grab her phone, the screen springs back to life. She quickly accepts the call, but when she glances over to the bed and sees Homura lying back down, she hurriedly makes her way out of the room.

Eyes now closed, Homura registers a whispered 'Hello?', but Madoka's voice fades away as the door clicks shut, muffling her footsteps as she heads further into the hallway. In the wake of silence, Homura brings Tora-kun to her face, pressing his soft fur against her cheek.

She knows her own alarm will ring soon, but she'll sleep until then.

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"...so you're not going to make it?" Madoka asks as she takes a seat at the breakfast bar. She stifles a yawn, listening as Sayaka rattles off an explanation, sounding more awake than she usually is at this time.

"No—I mean, for now, yes, unless I can convince my mom to let me go..."

Wiping the sleepy tears from her eyes, Madoka hums in response. "...Did you tell Kyouko-chan?"

"Err... well, I mean it's not like I can't not go—"

"So... you're going?" Madoka blinks sleepily, running a hand through her hair to work out the tangles.

"Yes... but—say, on the off-chance I end up not being able to..."

"Uh huh...?"

"Ahem... maybe..."

Madoka absently glances out the window, wondering how the weather will be today. "...maybe...?"

"...You might have to take my place in the tournament...?"

"Huh..." She's planning her wardrobe when what Sayaka has said finally registers. "I might have to—" her eyes widen, "I might have to what!"

"I can't just leave Kyouko hanging, Madoka!"

"Sayaka-chan, I can't—I've never even tried playing that game!"

"She automatically forfeits if she doesn't have a partner!"

The thought of having to face all those people—Madoka feels her mouth go dry. "...Sayaka-chan, you know you're my best friend..."

"Yup, and I love you—"

"—but there's no way I can compete in a competition that involves dancing! You're the one that gave me the nickname, 'Godoka', remember?!"

"Yeah, but—"

"Sayaka-chan."

"It's only if! If I'm not able to go!"

Madoka sighs, placing one arm flat on the breakfast bar to rest her chin on top of it. "...Okay, maybe that's something I can help you with instead. Why isn't your mom letting you go?"

"So, funny story..."

Madoka knows Sayaka is probably scratching the back of her head sheepishly. "Did something happen...?"

"Well..."

"Sayaka-chan, I can't help you if you don't tell me."

"...I haven't been doing too well in my classes."

Madoka frowns. "How bad...?"

"Uh, well, I had to retake my math course since I failed last semester..."

Madoka's frown deepens. "You failed?"

"I was really close to passing!"

"Then, what about this semester?"

"Well..."

Madoka sighs. "Sayaka-chan..."

"I have a test coming up—my mom wants me to study for it."

"Maybe it's better if you don't come then..."

"Aren't you supposed to be helping me! I don't need you to lecture me too, Madoka!"

Madoka falls silent, waiting for Sayaka to calm down. As the seconds drag on, and she's about to say something, Sayaka finally speaks.

"...Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you."

Madoka glances out the window, deciding she'll dress a bit lighter today as it'll most likely get warmer later. "...that's okay, Sayaka-chan. I know you're probably stressed."

"Yes! And that's why I want to—no, why I need to get away from here, Madoka! At least for a little bit."

There's a pleading tone to her words that soften the frown across Madoka's face. "Then..."

"Then...?"

"Then..." Madoka lifts her head, giving the kitchen a quick look around. The time on the clock blinks back at her, and she knows she needs to start breakfast soon since Homura will—

She sits up.

"That's it!"

"What is, Madoka?"

"I've—been having trouble with math too, and Homura-chan has been tutoring me."

"Uh huh..."

"So... maybe..." her voice trails off; it's a good idea, but also a terrible one.

"Maybe...?"

She apologizes to Homura in her mind, before, "...maybe Homura-chan can tutor you, too...?"

The line is quiet, and Madoka chews her lower lip in worry, already regretting her suggestion.

"...Do you think she'd really help me out, Madoka?"

She freezes. "...Homura-chan's nice—"

"To you!"

"She's—I'll... think of something," Madoka mumbles. Maybe she can cook something fancy for her, or—

"So, I'll tell my mom I'm going to Tokyo to study."

Even though she had suggested it, it sounds ridiculous to her, too. "...Do you think your mom will believe you?"

Sayaka sighs, creating static in both their ears. "It won't hurt to try."

"Then, you'll need to pass your test for sure."

"I know. Okay—I'm going to try it—I'll text you in a bit if she says yes."

"Okay. I need to start on breakfast, so I'll talk to you then, Sayaka-chan."

"Sure. Bye."

"Bye, Sayaka-chan."

Just as Madoka's about to pull her phone away, a quiet voice on the line stops her. "...Hey, Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"...Thanks."

Madoka smiles, "you're welcome, Sayaka-chan. Good luck."

"I'll need it. Bye!"

"Bye bye."

She listens as the sound cuts off, and when she puts the phone down, the home screen stares at her as their call ends. She places a hand to her forehead, "okay, now, I just need to convince Homura-chan..."

She sighs, this time her shoulders drooping as she knows it's not going to be easy. Slowly, she spins her seat away from the breakfast bar, and places her feet to the floor.

First, she'll wash up to clear her mind; she needs to be fully awake if she's going to think of a way to convince Homura to tutor Sayaka.

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When Homura steps into the kitchen, she finds Madoka at the counter, head bowed over two identical plates of eggs. Even when she walks closer, Madoka still does not acknowledge her, and with a worried glance, Homura heads to the toaster to start on the toast. There's already two slices of bread waiting, and only when she sets the timer after a light slam of the oven door, does Madoka finally realize that Homura has joined her.

"Morning, Homura-chan."

"Morning. Sorry, were you waiting long?"

Madoka shakes her head. "No, I just finished actually."

The machine to her left beeps, and Madoka smiles, nodding to the coffee maker.

"See, you're just in time."

Homura nods, turning her attention to the toaster oven. As soon as her back is turned, Madoka breathes out a sigh. She gathers a plate in each hand, and carries them to the breakfast bar. There's already two small bowls of salad set, and she slides the plates nearby.

Just as she moves to grab the condiments from the cabinet, there's a flurry of movement as Homura quickly snatches the toasts from the oven, placing them onto a waiting plate. She turns, and as she starts walking over, she catches Madoka's eye, and holds up her prize.

Anyone else, and they'd see the regular, blank faced Homura, but Madoka sees that little quirk of her lips. She responds with a shake of her head, and an exaggerated sigh. She's smiling though, which Homura accepts as a win.

They settle into their usual routine, and in a few more minutes, their meal is ready, with a steaming cup of coffee to help wash it all down.

Once they've taken their first bites, Homura lowers her fork, "did something happen?"

Madoka blinks, startled out of her thoughts at Homura's voice. "Hm?"

"You seem distracted," Homura tells her as she reaches for her coffee.

"Oh..." Madoka glances away, wishing for once her face wasn't so readable. She places her fork down against her plate, and follows Homura's example as she grabs her coffee. "Just.. a little," she murmurs, before taking a sip.

Homura watches Madoka for a moment, waiting, but when there's no following explanation, she turns back to her coffee. The slightly bitter liquid hits her tongue as she takes in another mouthful. They continue to drink in silence, until Homura finally sets her cup down, "let me ask this first: is your family okay?"

Face half hidden by her cup, Madoka blinks, slightly confused. "Yes, they're fine."

Homura nods. "Good." She places an elbow on the table to rest her chin on her hand. "By process of elimination then, this unfortunately has something to do with Miki Sayaka."

Madoka slowly realizes the weight of Homura's earlier question. After everything that had happened this past week, Homura's first thought was to make sure her family was fine. Madoka smiles, once again reminded what it is about Homura that she loves so much. Her smile falters however, when she remembers the reason of her worries.

Nervously, she cradles the cup in her hands, feeling the warmth through the wall of ceramic. She glances down, watching as the milky brown liquid ripples at the slightest movement.

She sighs, and brings her eyes back up to meet Homura's. "Yes..."

Homura turns back to her breakfast, knife and fork in hand as she continues to work on cutting her eggs. "Can I be hopeful and guess that she's no longer visiting this weekend?"

Sink or swim: "...funny that you should mention that..." Madoka tells her as she places her cup down with a small clatter.

Already not liking how this is going, Homura nods slowly, if only to encourage Madoka to continue with her explanation.

"She... can't, not visit..."

Homura's fork stops mid-way to her mouth, and one eyebrow lifts. "So... she is visiting?"

"Yes... kind of..."

With a soft sigh, Homura gently lowers her fork back onto the plate. "Madoka, a simple yes, or no will suffice."

Madoka blows out a puff of air. She breathes in deeply, and in one rushed breath, "Sayaka-chancancomebutsheneedsyoutotutorherinmathwillthatbeokay?"

"Hmm..." Homura grabs her coffee, moving to take another sip as Madoa waits for her response. After a long pause of silence, the cup returns to the table. Homura stares at Madoka, "Miki Sayaka wants to come, but she...?"

"...She..."

"She...?"

Madoka sighs in defeat, bowing her head. "Sayaka-chan needs a math tutor."

Homura drops her gaze down to her plate as she takes a mental count of how many pieces she still has to eat. "I'm sure she'll be able to find a good one."

"Homura-chan."

It's only because there's a small whine in Madoka's voice that makes her look up. "...if she fails she can just retake the test. They allow that at her college, don't they? And worst case scenario, she can merely repeat her class."

When Madoka nervously glances away, Homura's shoulders slump.

"...she's already retaking her class, isn't she?"

"Yes..."

Homura shakes her head. "Just how much of an idiot is Miki Sayaka? Courses aren't too difficult, and attendance isn't even mandatory. All she has to do is study —wait, no, what am I saying, of course she wouldn't study in her spare time..."

Feeling somewhat admonished, Madoka tries to defend Sayaka's shortcomings: "I'm not doing well in my math course either, Homura-chan..."

Homura blinks, this time registering the hurt expression across Madoka's face. "That's—different, Madoka."

Unwavering, Madoka stares her down. "Is it?"

Now feeling guilty, Homura sighs again, this time abandoning her breakfast completely to concentrate on their conversation. "You didn't fail."

"...But it's a possibility, especially if you aren't tutoring me."

"You'd—make do."

"Homura-chan."

"Would she even have time? She's—her competition is tonight; aren't there plans to spend time with the red devil and her keeper as well? When is she planning on leaving?"

"Maybe she'll stay an extra day, leave on Monday?"

Homura frowns, not liking that one bit. "When is her test?"

"Uhm." Madoka blinks, trying to recall if Sayaka had said. Her mind draws a blank. "She didn't say... let me text her real quick."

As Madoka digs out her phone, Homura returns to her breakfast. She gently shakes her head, knowing it would do her no good to brood over it. She schools her expression, and makes her way through her food as Madoka messages Sayaka.

Eventually, Madoka lifts her head from her phone, and sensing her gaze, Homura looks up expectantly.

There's a nervous smile that greets her, and Homura can feel her mood plummet even further.

Madoka forces the words out. "...Tuesday."

After a pause, Homura licks her lips, tasting the remnants of coffee still stuck to her mouth. "Next Tuesday." Her voice is flat, because she already knows—

"This upcoming Tuesday."

Calmly, Homura sets her fork down, and then pushes her plate away to the side, clearing the area in front of her. With Madoka watching, she brings her hands together, and lightly bows her head. As her eyes close, the puzzled expression on Madoka's face is the last she sees, before, "dear God, please help that idiot Miki Sayaka—"

"Homura-chan."

Lavender eyes open, gaze cutting across to match Madoka's unimpressed look. "I'm not a miracle worker, Madoka."

Madoka sighs, and with a bit of satisfaction, Homura watches as her smaller shoulders slouch. "...I know, Homura-chan."

Homura reaches for her coffee, and this time she takes a longer drink, letting the liquid wash down a different, more bitter taste in her mouth. "...I'll try, but only because you asked."

Eyes widening, Madoka looks at her in surprise. "You will?"

"Yes." Homura reaches for the sugar, wanting to add a bit more just for today.

"Thank you, Homura-chan!" Madoka is grinning, and Homura stares down at her coffee as she drops half a spoon of sugar into her cup.

"You're lucky she's your friend, Madoka."

Slightly curious, Madoka sits up in her seat as she reaches for her fork. "What do you mean by that, Homura-chan?"

Liquid swirls, and there's the light clink as metal taps ceramic as Homura stirs her coffee. "I'm only willing to help her out because you asked."

Madoka blinks.

"Only because you asked," Homura repeats, before she drops her gaze back to her drink. "There's a certain limit of what I'll do for you though, Madoka, so please, don't take advantage of me too much..."

As Homura takes a tentative sip, she misses the look on Madoka's face.

"I wouldn't, Homura-chan..." Madoka's voice is soft, and Homura only catches the tail end of her name.

She glances up, but Madoka is finally working on her breakfast of cooled eggs.

Sensing the conversation to be more or less over, Homura turns her attention to her salad.

As the light crunch of lettuce fills her ears, she does a mental rundown of their plans for this weekend. She doesn't look forward to any of at all, and hopes it'll be better than she knows it will be. She reaches for her coffee again, and decides that something just a bit sweeter every once in a while isn't bad at all.

Unconsciously, her eyes are drawn to Madoka, and her mood lifts ever so slightly when Madoka catches her eye, offering her a smile.

The scene is familiar, and breakfast continues like any other day.

In between bites, Madoka changes the topic to address their next line of business. "I was thinking... maybe we should try the shopping plaza instead?"

Mouth full, Homura hums, signalling for Madoka to continue with her line of thought.

"The bigger one, close to the market. That one has a lot of different shops compared to the mall. Since we're not sure what to get Himeko-chan, some more variety might give us an idea?"

The thought of going to that particular plaza doesn't sit well with Homura as she knows how busy it gets during the weekends.

"Plus," Homura looks up when Madoka continues talking, "it opens earlier—" they both glance to the clock, "the sooner we get there, the sooner we can leave?"

Hesitantly, Homura nods. "True. That sounds promising at least... the mall would probably be just as busy."

Plans decided, they move on to lighter, more random topics as they make short work of their food.

It isn't long until they finish eating, and after letting their dishes soak in the sink, they get ready to leave.

/

"Want me to hold that, Homura-chan?"

Homura glances down to the small umbrella in her hand; she doesn't think she'll use it, but she wants to bring it, just in case. She evaluates her clothes: shirt, cardigan, khakis; only her jacket has pockets wide enough, and her wallet and keys are already safely tucked into one, while her phone and medication are in another.

A hand is held out expectantly as the owner smiles encouragingly.

Eventually, she caves, passing it over. "If it's not too much trouble..."

"It's fine. I have plenty of space in my bag anyways," Madoka tells her, swinging the canvas bag over to open it.

Homura watches as the umbrella disappears into one of the zippered compartments, absently noting the light grey colour matched Madoka's zippered jacket. Vaguely, she recognizes that jacket; she had been wondering where it had gone.

"Did you want me to hold your water too?"

"Ah," Homura shakes her head. "Hm, maybe I should just bring my bag too..."

"Just hand it over, Homura-chan," Madoka says as she stuffs her own water bottle in her bag. She doesn't close the opening though, and merely lets Homura peer inside: other than the small umbrella, bottle of water, phone and wallet, it's empty. "I'm bringing mine really for my water. I don't mind carrying yours."

Homura still hasn't agreed. "But you'd be carrying most of my stuff—"

Knowing how stubborn Homura can be, Madoka tries a different approach. "If we don't leave soon it's going to open without us..."

Homura sighs, and reluctantly hands the bottle over. She stares as Madoka adds it to bag, "do you want me to carry—"

"No," Madoka says easily as she brushes past her, her stocking covered feet leading her to the living room. "Did you put on your sunblock?" Even though her shorts leave her more exposed than Homura, she knows how important it is that Homura keeps herself covered.

Frowning, Homura follows her. "Yes."

"Then, we're ready?" Madoka asks as she glances to the front door. She checks off a mental list, distractedly readjusting her shirt as she does so. The stove is off—her keys are in her hand, and wallet and phone are in her bag—

"Yes..."

Madoka nods, satisfied with her list and Homura's answer as she moves to her shoes. Realizing her defeat, Homura joins her by the door to put on her boots. Once done, they exit the apartment, locking the door behind them. A confirmation it's secured, before they head down the stairs.

It's still early morning when they step onto the streets, but the air outside is already warm, sunlight overhead already bright. The area isn't as empty as Homura would've liked, but they're still able to walk comfortably side by side. It isn't long until Madoka is grabbing Homura's hand, linking their fingers together as they make their way to the plaza.

More or less used to it, Homura bites back her quip, and instead decides to initiate conversation.

"So... do you think make-up would be good?"

Madoka hums, catching on after a slight pause. "Maybe. You said it's just her and Keiichi-san, right?"

Homura nods. "Yes."

Madoka hums again, if only to stop herself from asking invasive questions. "Well, kids in her class will probably be interested in make-up soon... and if Keiichi-san is as clueless as you say he is, she'd... probably feel isolated not doing the same things her classmates are..."

"That's true," Homura agrees. Like always, her face gives nothing away.

Madoka wonders if she felt like that at that age.

As if sensing her thoughts, Homura glances over. "...But even if I got her make-up, it's not like there's anyone to teach her."

"Ah." Madoka feels a stab of guilt. "W-Well, hmm..."

"There are tutorials online though," Homura murmurs. "Maybe her classmates will feel sorry for her, and teach her."

Madoka eyes Homura once more; her voice is even, and face still frustratingly unreadable. "Homura-chan...?"

"Hm?"

"Himeko-chan is...?"

Homura blinks, turning to give Madoka a brief glance. "Is...?"

Madoka nervously licks her lips, absently noting she should have grabbed some lip balm on their way out. "I mean, Keiichi-san, and Himeko-chan...? They're... are they from your brother's side of the family...?"

Pale lavender flickers over, before Homura looks away. "Something... like that," is all she says.

Madoka stares as the mystery surrounding Homura and her family grows.

Homura's gaze is absent, and Madoka wishes she could see what she's seeing. They both slow to a halt as they reach the corner and wait for the light to turn green. It's quiet, save for the noises of ongoing traffic, but Madoka is close enough that she can hear the soft 'pass' Homura says a moment later.

Madoka draws back, disappointed.

Homura gently squeezes her hand, and pulls her forward as the light changes, and the other pedestrians start walking. "Not today," Homura murmurs, "but I'll tell you when I'm ready."

Madoka nods, this time tightening her fingers around Homura's. "Does she like to read?" She steers the conversation back around, ignoring how relieved Homura looks as the subject is dropped.

By the time they reach the plaza, they're not any closer to figuring out a present, but neither of them seem to mind as they enjoy the friendly banter shared between them.

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Almost an hour later, Sayaka has still yet to contact Madoka, and they still remain empty handed. Homura takes note of the time; they can browse at least one more shop, before they need to stop somewhere so she can take her medication.

Just as she dismisses a store nearby, Madoka grabs her hand tightly, and drags her through the door she had just wanted to bypass.

"Look, Homura-chan," Madoka gushes as she makes a beeline to one of the colourful displays inside.

Homura blinks, but her lips twitch into a smile when she realizes what it is that has caught Madoka's attention.

Madoka flutters about the collection, moving from one set to another as Homura is reluctantly dragged behind her.

Finally, she seems to have settled on a small tray, and turns to Homura, one hand showing off her discovery.

Despite its size, there's no lack of attention to detail, and she easily recognizes it to be a much, much smaller version of the round bear that's tucked into Madoka's bed back at the apartment.

"I'm not sure if she likes that character," Homura says dryly.

Madoka gives her a sheepish look, "sorry, this is for me..."

"I—had no idea."

Madoka sticks out her tongue.

"Hm, but I didn't know they had this much variety." Homura glances around, amazed at how many different faces and colour combinations existed.

Madoka grins. "Looks like it's coming back with a bang. I'm going to buy this. You can stay here and continue being mesmerized by the adorableness of the Honey Bears."

She drops their held hands, and Homura watches as Madoka makes her way over to the register. When she reaches the end of the line, Homura turns back to the display.

"Still, this many...?" she murmurs to herself. Just as she's about to check out another section, something catches her eye. She blinks.

When Madoka has finished paying, she turns around, expecting to find Homura by the entrance. That area is empty, and she looks around in confusion, wondering if Homura is still browsing further inside.

She starts walking towards the back, head turning as she passes each display. Just as she's about to reach for her phone, there's a quiet voice behind her. She turns around, smiling when she sees Homura approach. She automatically reaches for Homura's hand, and only once she feels the familiar warmth between her fingers, does she notice the small paper bag Homura is holding.

"You found something?" No wonder she hadn't seen her, she had probably walked past her when she was paying.

"Kind of," Homura murmurs. She pulls Madoka towards the exit. "Let's find somewhere to sit."

"Oh! Is it that late already?" She quickly stuffs her new purchase into her bag as Homura lead her outside.

After searching for a bit, Madoka spots an empty bench nearby, and they both head over to take a seat.

As Homura quietly pulls out her medication, Madoka forces herself to look away as feelings of Homura's 'secret' once again rears its ugly head. She doesn't say anything as a handful of pills disappears into Homura's mouth, and concentrates

on her shoes, scuffing the soles against the brick flooring as Homura finishes her bottle of water.

She's staring hard at a worn part of her stockings when there's a light bump against her shoulder.

A quiet voice in her ear: "are you done pouting?"

She lifts her head, "I'm not pouting."

Homura's raised eyebrow is the only response. Madoka sighs, knowing she shouldn't feel like this, but the hurt is still fresh in her mind, even though Homura had apologized plenty of times.

She blinks when there's a rustle of paper, and something is dropped into her lap.

"Here."

"What's...?" She takes the bag into her hands, already identifying the packaging to be from the store they had just vacated. She glances at Homura, confused, but when all she receives is an encouraging nod, she turns the bag over, and then gently slides a finger under the sticker that's keeping the bag closed.

She peers inside curiously, but the object is small enough that she can't tell what it is without taking it out. Now fully intrigued, she tips the bag over into her waiting palm, and blinks when a small honey bear tumbles out. It's the same size as the one she had just purchased, except the colours are different, and—

She glances over to Homura, who is now staring forward, one hand behind her as she nervously fidgets with her hair.

A brief flicker of lavender, before Homura turns away. "Her... name is Maroka," Homura says softly. She closes her eyes, and Madoka is sure the splash of pink across Homura's cheeks is not from the heat. "Homu-chan... needs a friend." She clears her throat, eyes cracking open as she points to the little ribbons attached to the new honey bear's ears. "Homu-chan will be lonely, so I thought, she'd need someone to keep her company."

Madoka is unable to hold back her grin; she knows Homura is teasing her by using the old nickname Takkun used to call her, but the meaning behind it is significant.

Not noticing Madoka's reaction, Homura sits up, already moving to stand. "Well, that's—if you want it though, I'm not—"

Madoka quickly throws her arms around Homura, bringing her back down to the bench with a hug. "Thank you, Homura-chan. Are you sure I can have this? Weren't we shopping for Himeko-chan today?"

"I can take it back if you—"

Madoka hugs her a bit tighter. "No, this is perfect. Thank you, Homura-chan."

"S-Sure, Madoka." Homura tries to pull away, embarrassed. "We still need to get Himeko something though..."

"Oh, let me attach this to my bag first!" Madoka says as she finally lets go.

Homura rubs her arm, absently wondering how someone so small could be so strong.

After another moment, Madoka turns to Homura, wide grin still across her face as she holds up her bag. "Finished!"

Homura brings her hand forward, poking the small Homu-chan with her finger. "...Take care of her," she murmurs quietly to herself.

She blinks when Madoka snakes their hands together, and turns to see Madoka smilling at her. "I will."

Homura stops herself from brushing her hair back, and instead moves to stand. "Shall we?"

"Sure, Homura-chan." Madoka follows after her.

They share a smile, before they once again continue on their quest to find Himeko a gift.

\\

By the time they're reaching the end of the line of stores, Homura's interest has waned considerably as the surrounding temperature and crowd continues to grow.

"Mm, maybe the mall would've been a better choice?" Madoka murmurs as she looks around. They're no less closer to finding a present, but it's extremely difficult shopping for someone she knows nothing about.

Homura shakes her head. "No, I probably should have done this in the beginning..." She pulls Madoka forward, and they enter another shop. Her footsteps are sure as she beelines towards the registers, and after a quick decision, grabs a neutral looking design, before joining the customers in line.

"Are you sure that's what you'll get her, Homura-chan? After all that searching, it's a bit disappointing, isn't it?"

Homura glances down to the flat object held in her hand. "She likes reading... I don't know what I was thinking. Sorry for wasting your time, Madoka."

Madoka sighs, and they take a small step forward as the line moves. "...It wasn't a waste of time; I enjoyed spending time with you." She smiles as her free hand moves to gently brush against the two new additions clipped to her bag. "This more than makes up for it."

"Mm." The line moves again, and it isn't long until Homura is paying.

Once done, they exit, and she hands off the gift over to Madoka for safe keeping. It disappears into her bag, and after a reassuring pat, they both look up as they realize their errand is now finished.

"...Is there anywhere you'd like to go, Madoka?" Homura asks as they stand off under a shaded area, undecided.

"Hmm," Madoka shakes her head. "Not really—though... I guess since we're nearby, do you want to drop by the supermarket?"

"Sure," Homura easily agrees. They turn back around to make their way to the plaza's entrance. "...Did Miki Sayaka ever get back to you?"

Madoka reaches into her pocket, and when she unlocks her screen, she shows Homura the empty inbox. "...No."

"...Maybe you should start practicing."

Madoka makes a face. "I'm not going to replace her in the competition, Homura-chan."

Homura doesn't say anything, but a second later, Madoka lands a punch on her shoulder.

"Ow. What was that for?"

But the smile on Homura's face gives it all away, and Madoka punches her again.

"Ow."

"I am not dancing, Homura-chan. Could you imagine—" she cuts herself off when Homura turns away to hide her face.

Madoka doesn't blame her, and she quickly sends Sayaka another text; she'd do almost anything for Sayaka, but joining a dancing competition last minute is not one of those things.

"...Are you looking for something in particular at the market?" Now calmer, Homura turns back just as Madoka stuffs her phone into her pocket.

Madoka brightens at the reminder. "They have peaches on sale—I was thinking about making something with them this weekend."

"Will you have time?"

Madoka shrugs. "Maybe, but if not then we can eat them plain." She places a hand to her chin, "I'll look for more fruits, and make a fruit salad instead...? I think they should have cherries in stock soon..."

Homura nods, adding the mentioned items to a mental list. "Should we buy some bread? We're almost out."

"Yes, and uhmmm... I had something else I wanted... but I can't remember now."

"Hopefully you'll remember when we get there." Homura glances up as they pass a store with a clock displayed on the window. "...it's kind of late, isn't it? The peaches may be sold out already."

"That's fine," Madoka tells her. "I was going to drop by after class on Monday instead, but since we're in the area..." She glances at her pocket when she feels a buzz. "I think—Sayaka-chan has finally answered."

They stop walking as Madoka checks her phone, and when Homura sees the relief that washes over Madoka's face, she sighs, trying to make her expression look wistful.

"And here I was, willing to attend your competitive dancing debut."

Madoka sticks out her tongue in response as she repockets her phone. "Sayaka-chan is already on the train; she was in such a rush that she forgot to hit send. She'll be here around two... did you want to grab something to eat first, or did you want to wait until we meet up with her at the station?"

"Hm..." Homura shrugs. "I'm fine with whatever. Though, something cold would be nice..."

"Maybe we can split something," Madoka murmurs.

They start walking again, finding it increasingly harder to navigate as the population in the plaza slowly reaches its peak.

The shops they had passed beforehand are now overflowing, and food stalls that had not yet opened when they had arrived are in full service.

Madoka sniffs the air, and the sweet, and salty smell of food makes her mouth water. She turns her head, eyeing the takoyaki stand.

She tugs on Homura's arm, "Homura-chan, do you want some takoyaki?"

Without waiting for an answer, Madoka starts dragging them over to line up.

"...Sure, some nice, hot takoyaki sounds nice," Homura tells her, voice dry.

Madoka ignores her as she reads one of the displayed menus setup nearby. "They have blended drinks too. Is there any flavour you want to try, Homura-chan?"

"Hmmm." Homura bypasses the coffee for once, instead looking towards the fruit ones. "...Pineapple mango?"

Madoka looks up in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes," Homura agrees, ignoring her reaction. "Did you want to share? You can choose something else if you don't like those flavours."

Madoka shakes her head. "No, that sounds fine. What about the takoyaki?"

"...Sure, I'll take some."

Madoka points to one of the items, "...what flavour did you want, Homura-chan? They have chocolate."

Homura blinks, reading the section in question. "...Chocolate takoyaki?"

They share a look.

Madoka glances back to the display, eyeing the pictures as it cycles through the different flavours. "...Do you think it'll be good?"

Knowing that Madoka is now set on the idea, Homura sighs in resignation. "Maybe."

"There's strawberry, banana, pandan..."

"Plain."

Madoka ignores her, continuing to read over the other choices on the menu. "Coffee, vanilla—"

"Plain," Homura insists again.

"Matcha—"

The line starts moving, and Homura gently pushes Madoka forward. "We can try the other flavours another day."

After another moment, Madoka grudgingly concedes. "...Okay."

Homura shakes her head in amusement. "Don't pout." She pokes Madoka's side, earning her a small 'eep' that has the customer in front of them turning to look back in curiosity.

Madoka gives them an embarrassed smile, and after another glance, they turn around. Madoka immediately whirls on Homura with an angry whisper, "Homura-chan!"

"It's your fault for pouting."

Madoka huffs. "I'll get you back for that, Homura-chan."

"...You're going to choose a flavoured one, aren't you?"

"Hmph."

With a sigh, Homura braces herself for their upcoming meal.

\\

Just as feared, when Madoka discovers she can choose up to four different flavours for one order, she does exactly that.

Though the line is long, the workers move quickly, and in less than ten minutes, their order is ready. Spoils in hand, Madoka drags Homura over to join the other dining patrons lined up along the designated eating areas. Awnings are set high above, offering customers a small respite from the sun as they eat. She finds an empty spot, and they get there five steps quicker than another couple. There's an exchange of an apologetic smile, and as the couple slinks away to find another spot, Madoka turns to Homura, tray of takoyaki held out expectantly.

"Which one do you want to try first, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, eyes darting back and forth in excitement.

Sipping their drink, Homura stares at the offered food warily; they all look normal enough, but there's only two that are actually plain. She's more than happy with her order though, which puts her at a good enough mood to humour Madoka's choices. Reluctantly, she pulls the drink away, and then reaches for one of the skewers. After a quick debate, she stabs it into the middle takoyaki: the light pink tinge alluding to the flavour.

With a grin, Madoka follows her example, choosing the pink one as well.

"Careful, it's hot," Homura warns her as Madoka moves to take a bite.

"I know," Madoka says. When Homura tilts her head, Madoka sighs, and obediently blows on the surface to cool it down.

As she does this, Homura absently glances further into the plaza; the brightness from the sunlight is almost blinding, and the way her clothes sticks to her skin reminds her of the surrounding heat. And yet, here they are, eating hot takoyaki on a warm, sunny day.

Her gaze slides over to the very reason why this is happening; Madoka is still trying to cool off her takoyaki, and Homura unconsciously smiles, amused to find herself in this situation.

Unaware she's being watched, Madoka eagerly takes a bite as Homura tries to stop her.

"I don't think it's—"

"Ach—" Madoka almost spits out her food as she proceeds to burn her tongue. The inside is still piping hot, and she quickly balances the takoyaki in between her teeth, breathing onto it lower the temperature.

"I told you it was hot."

With tears in her eyes, Madoka glances to Homura, and frowns when she sees her takoyaki is still balanced on her skewer, untouched.

Madoka turns back to her own takoyaki, one hand placed in front of her mouth, just in case. After a quick, tentative test, she finds her piece is now cooler, and proceeds to eat it.

She's done long before Homura finishes hers, and sips at their drink as she waits, letting the cold liquid soothe her tongue.

Finally, "three out of five. It's—not as sweet as I thought it'd be, and you can't really taste the strawberry."

After a moment, Madoka pulls the drink away, and nods. "I agree; I was hoping there'd be more strawberry to it." She licks her lips, tasting the pineapple and mango. She makes a mental note to be on the lookout for those fruits at the market as well; maybe they can make their own blended drink at home.

"You can choose next," Homura tells her, drawing her away from her thoughts.

"Hmm." Madoka glances between the remaining three flavours. "...Let's leave the plain for last, so, we'll go with this one."

She stabs the far right—it's a bit darker, and if Homura hadn't been there when Madoka had ordered, she would have assumed it was just a bit overcooked.

Reluctantly, Homura selects the same coloured takoyaki. Just like before, Homura waits for hers to cool down, while Madoka is impatient, and proceeds to stuff the whole takoyaki into her mouth, once again starting the tentative process of hot potato in her mouth.

Once it's finally cooled enough to eat, Madoka chews on her chocolate takoyaki, trying to score it accurately despite her burnt tongue. She can feel Homura's judging stare in her direction, and chooses to ignore it as she wavers between a three or a four. She quickly swallows her piece, and then watches as Homura slowly finishes hers.

Sensing the judging stare now turned her way, Homura raises an eyebrow at Madoka.

"...Takoyaki is best enjoyed in one bite," Madoka tells her, addressing Homura's silent judgement.

Homura wipes a bit of sauce from her lips with her napkin, mentally scoring the piece she had just eaten. "I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking it though," Madoka accuses.

"Is that another one of your 'Madokaisms'?" Homura asks instead, folding the small square paper over in her hand.

Madoka blinks, but after a second, she remembers the meaning, and hmphs in exaggerated indignation. "It's a fact," she says, emphasizing her point by driving her skewer into another takoyaki. She holds the tray out, and Homura obediently takes the last flavoured one. "Three, by the way—not enough chocolate. Couldn't really taste it, but their takoyaki is good..."

Homura nods in agreement.

They continue on, using their own respective ways to eat their takoyaki. The next flavour is Banana, and the sweetness earns a three from Madoka, while Homura scores it the lowest of two out of five. They make little work of the last one, and concede plain takoyaki is still the best. Once they're finished with their drink, the trash is deposited into the closest trashcan.

The area is starting to fill with even more people, and they relinquish their spot to a waiting family, and start heading over to the supermarket before they run out of time.

The crowds make anything but single file walking impossible, and as Homura takes the lead out of the plaza, Madoka quickly grabs her hand. After a questioning backward glance, Homura slows her pace allowing Madoka to catch up. With a small smile, Madoka snatches the back of Homura's jacket with her other hand as they press against the flow of traffic.

When they finally reach the much emptier streets, the stark difference in noise is almost deafening compared to the bustling shopping plaza.

Homura breathes a soft sigh of relief. "...I knew why I avoided places like this."

Madoka smiles, sidling up to Homura's side to link arms now that there's enough room to do so. "I have to admit—it was starting to be a bit too much for me too." She pauses, absently staring into the direction of the large arc that marked the entrance, "the game center will be even worse today, won't it?"

"Don't remind me," Homura tells her. She glances at Madoka, feeling the warmth from her close proximity. "Can I have my umbrella?"

"Sure, Homura-chan." Without detaching herself from Homura's side, Madoka manages to pull out the small umbrella from her bag, and hands it over.

The handle extends, and the folded rods unfurl with a small pop. Homura raises it above their heads, and though the air is still warm, there's a noticeable difference as it blocks the heat from the sun.

She gently pulls Madoka forward to start walking. "...I'm not going tonight."

When Madoka looks over, Homura matches her gaze.

"I know." Madoka replies, smiling as they continue their leisurely pace. "I... might sit out too."

"Won't airplane girl want you to cheer her on?"

"Mm... surprisingly, Sayaka-chan doesn't really like it when people she knows watches her compete."

"That is surprising. She seems like someone who would."

Madoka taps her chin in thought. "She does," Madoka agrees after another moment. "But Sayaka-chan is also surprisingly shy?"

At Homura's raised eyebrows, Madoka retracts her words.

"Not shy, like you are—"

"—I am not shy."

Madoka remains quiet, before she continues, ignoring Homura's earlier words. "She doesn't... do well under pressure, I guess?"

Homura leans forward into the sun, bringing her body into Madoka's peripheral vision. "How am I shy?"

Madoka turns to Homura, and smiles when it looks like Homura's almost pouting. There's a small surge of confidence, and the words tumble out of Madoka's mouth before she can stop herself: "because you're cute."

Homura blinks. She leans back into the shade, once again lining up with Madoka, and they continue walking for another moment of silence.

Realizing what she just said, Madoka clears her throat, "I-I mean—" she looks over, but Homura is now facing the opposite direction.

Madoka squints, and she's sure it's not her imagination that Homura's ears are red. With a grin, Madoka faces forward as she waits for Homura to collect herself.

It takes almost the full block before Homura looks over, but when it seems like Madoka has dropped the subject, she slowly relaxes.

They continue to the corner, and stop walking at the red traffic light. Madoka watches as Homura presses the crosswalk button with her elbow. As they wait for the light to turn green, Madoka absently looks around.

"So..." Madoka glances over as Homura speaks, "Miki Sayaka is shy?"

The temptation is there, but Madoka fights it back. She stays on topic, letting Homura off the hook for now. She nods, "...you know how Sayaka-chan can sometimes seem a bit... overconfident?"

Homura rolls her eyes, "no," she says, voice flat, "I never noticed."

Madoka smiles in amusement. The light turns green, and once they check to make sure traffic has stopped, they both step down from the curb. As they cross the street, Madoka continues, "Sayaka-chan doesn't like to lose."

"Hmmm."

They reach the curb, and step back onto the sidewalk, continuing on their way to the market.

"She's not a sore loser, and she can accept if someone's better than her, just... she doesn't like it if she's trying her best, but she still loses in the end."

"...What a bothersome person."

"I mean, I kind of understand—like if I were doing something and people were there cheering me on, but I lost, I'd feel even more horrible."

Homura sighs, "well, I'll admit I can understand her thinking..." She mumbles something under her breath.

"Long story short—in high school, I went to Sayaka-chan's softball games when they were still competing to see if they'd make it to the finals—but only ever went to one of her games when they actual got into the finals."

Homura turns to Madoka, "...so, that means we don't have to watch her 'dance'."

Madoka shakes her head, "nope."

"...Good. That's one less thing to worry about."

"We're meeting them after though."

"If she wins, she's going to be insufferable, isn't she?"

"...Maybe." Madoka smiles weakly, "but, if she loses..."

Homura sighs. "...Is it Monday yet?"

"Nope. It's barely Saturday, Homura-chan."

"At least humour me?"

"I have to keep you in check sometimes, Homura-chan."

"Hmph."

Madoka smiles in amusement. Her smile slowly fades though, and she sneaks a side glance to Homura. "...Speaking of this weekend, have you decided when you were going to drop off the present?"

Homura lifts one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "Her party is Sunday, but showing up on that day is just asking for trouble."

Madoka blinks. She frowns, "because her family will be there?"

Homura shakes her head. "Because her friends will be there—imagine stepping into a party with a bunch of twelve year olds..."

"They can't be that bad..."

Homura raises an eyebrow, and Madoka gives her a sheepish smile.

"But—yes, also because her family is there. I was thinking about dropping by on Monday instead, after my appointment."

Stopping in her tracks, Madoka pulls them both to a halt as she quickly turns to Homura, "appointment? What appointment?"

"Uhm," Homura unconsciously tries to take a step back, but is unable to do so as Madoka holds her in place. "...My doctor's appointment... for my medication..."

Seeing Homura's face, Madoka straightens up, easing her frown into a more neutral expression. "Right—you made it last week... what time is it at?"

Homura blinks. "Around ten thirty—but as long as I get there before I need to take my medication..."

"Hmm," Madoka chews her lip, "I wouldn't be back in time—I'll just miss my morning class."

"Ah, that's okay, you don't need to—"

When Madoka glares in her direction, Homura absently reaches behind her to brush back her hair.

"It'll take at least a few hours... you'd just be in the waiting room waiting for me... wouldn't it be better to go to class?"

"I'll just study while I wait."

Homura opens her mouth, but closes it when she sees Madoka's expression. "...What about Miki Sayaka? She'll—"

"—sleep until the afternoon," Madoka finishes. "And, afterwards she should be looking over her notes. She'll be fine."

There's a definitive note in Madoka's voice, and Homura slowly nods.

"Okay..."

Madoka gives her a beaming smile, and tugs her forward. "Is there anything you'd like me to cook this weekend?"

Homura follows Madoka's lead, and they resume walking.

"Nothing in particular..."

"Hmmm... how about soba?"

"That's fine."

"Though, I've been kind of wanting to eat gyoza..."

"Whichever's fine."

"Are you sure you don't want to request anything?"

They turn the corner, and Madoka walks behind Homura as a few pedastrians pass them. Once it's clear, she rejoins Homura side with a expectant look on her face.

"I'm fine with whatever you cook—no matter what it is, it'll taste ten times better than anything I could make."

Madoka's expression turns shy, "I'm—not that good at cooking...my Papa is better than me."

Homura gently bumps Madoka's shoulder, "I've had your Papa's cooking, and I'd say yours is pretty much on par with his."

Madoka feels her face flush. "I'm... okay..." she mumbles. "A-Anyway, looks like we're arriving soon! I hope it's not as crowded as the other plaza was."

Homura tactfully lets the subject drop, "hopefully, but I doubt it."

Madoka brightens suddenly, "that reminds me, the takoyaki earlier made me want to eat some strawberries. Do you think they'll have anymore?"

"...kind of late in the season isn't it?"

"Sometimes they have leftovers..."

"Guess you can look for some."

"Mm..."

Homura gives her a side glance, "...just so you know, you don't need to buy anymore snacks."

Madoka huffs, "I wasn't thinking of buying any more."

"What was it? 'If you eat too much, it'll make your tummy hurt, and your mouth taste funny.'"

Madoka sticks her tongue out.

"I'm just quoting what you told me to say—" Homura dodges the punch, but is caught off guard when Madoka pokes her side.

She twitches, body reacting to the touch.

"You're using the wrong tone!"

"...I wasn't aware I was supposed to say it a certain way."

Madoka moves to poke her again, and Homura twists her body to avoid her.

Homura nervously coughs, "right... let's—hurry and buy those groceries."

With a warning glare, Madoka stops any more snide comments from the side bar. She grips Homura's arm tightly, half for her own enjoyment, but more to keep Homura from running away.

When Homura gives her a nervous glance, Madoka smiles in response.

Homura wisely keeps quiet, and Madoka hums happily as they continue on their way.

As they approach the familiar plaza, there's already an alarming amount of people outside that slows down their pace.

"It's pretty crowded," Madoka murmurs. She turns to Homura in question. "Should we just go to the smaller market?"

"Mm..." Homura brushes back her hair—a small sign of her unease. She eyes the crowd, and with a reluctant sigh, shakes her head. "We're already here—we might as well check it out. There's also a higher chance you'd be able to find strawberries here than over there."

"That's okay—"

Wordlessly, Homura tugs Madoka forward. Before they enter the gauntlet, Homura tucks the umbrella away, knowing it's too crowded to use it once they're inside. With the sun shining above, they follow the line of weekend shoppers under the overhead arch.

It takes them twice as long to reach the market, but only because Homura walks slower when she sees Madoka looking around; they rarely visit during the weekends, and the normal plaza they are used to has been transformed with all the sales and shops that only appear for these two days. When they finally reach their destination, Homura squares her shoulders as soon as she spots the double glass doors.

With practiced ease, a basket is scooped up along the way to the entrance. Once inside, they breathe a sigh of relief as the cooler air hits them. The loud murmurs increase as they walk past the doors, and suddenly, a small jingle plays overhead, followed by an announcement commencing one of their daily specials.

There's a rush of footsteps, and alarmed, they both turn left as a small crowd is drawn towards the cashier area.

"It'll be sold out soon!"

"Hurry!"

They both listen to the frantic shouting, watching as a small crowd starts trying to push themselves forward to make it in time for the hourly bargain.

Homura quickly moves to the side, dragging Madoka with her as they enter the vegetable and fruit aisle to dodge the danger.

"I wonder what's on sale," Madoka mumbles quietly as they continue to watch as people beeline towards the back.

"You're welcomed to check it out," Homura responds dryly. Done with gawking, she turns to start browsing for any produce on sale.

Madoka gives the crowd another curious glance, before deciding to join Homura instead.

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With a start, she sleepily sits up to take a look around. The compartment is packed full, and she's glad she was able to secure a seat by the window before it had filled up.

After a check of the time, she relaxes in her chair, arms crossed to brace herself as she decides to continue her nap; she still has time before she arrives. She ignores the unease churning in her stomach, pushing aside her worries, instead trying to psyche herself up for the upcoming event.

The song playing in her ear suddenly fades away, and seconds later, a familiar bass line starts. She increases the volume on her music player, drawing up her hood over her head, letting the music drown out her thoughts.

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They spend more time at the market than intended. When they finally return to their apartment, the takoyaki has burned off, and they only have enough time to rest a little before they need to leave to meet Sayaka at the station.

As Homura stows away the flour, she takes an evaluating look into the pantry, figuring she'll grab a small snack since she's already here.

Almost as if she was drawn to the thought of junk food, she feels Madoka sidle in against her. She gives her a side glance, but Madoka doesn't notice as she peers at the snacks, most likely trying to decide which one to eat first.

Without waiting for her, Homura reaches forward and grabs the closest one. She brings it closer, and they both look down to see what she has chosen.

"Chocolate potato chips," Homura murmurs.

Madoka grins, and quickly snags the bag from Homura's hands. "I had something similar to this before—I remember this being good."

Homura looks down at her now empty hands. With a shake of her head, she closes the pantry door. Instead of joining Madoka, she walks over to the refrigerator to pull out the jug of leftover tea.

"Madoka, did you want some?"

Already moving to rip open the packaging, Madoka looks up, and when she sees Homura holding out the container, she nods. "I'll take some, thank you, Homura-chan. Hurry up."

"I'm moving as fast as I can," Homura tells her sarcastically as she grabs two cups, all while moving at her usual pace.

Impatiently, Madoka reads the packaging as she waits for Homura to join her. 'Potato and chocolate! Delicious!' She grins to herself, amused at the tagline.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," a voice tells her as a cup is placed in front of her.

Madoka ignores Homura's tone, already holding out the bag. She shakes it in Homura's direction. In the midst of drinking, Homura quirks an eyebrow in response.

"You have two hands, don't you?" Madoka asks.

Wordlessly, Homura holds out one hand. Not a moment later, and Madoka proceeds to fill it with chips.

Alarmed, Homura quickly lowers her cup, "that's too much."

Without saying anything, Madoka grabs half, placing them into her own waiting hand, before she pours a few more to join the small pile. She grabs one, and lifts her eyes, staring at Homura expectantly.

When Homura finally has a chip in between her fingers, Madoka nods.

With a small murmur of 'itadakimasu', they each eat a piece.

For a few moments, they quietly crunch on the sweet and salty snack while arbitrarily judging the taste according to their own preferences.

As soon as she's finished, Madoka stuffs two more into her mouth.

"Five out of five," she says as soon as she's done with those. She licks her lips, tasting the salt, and then a small bit of chocolate. "It's as good as the one I had before."

"...Three out of five."

"Eh?" Madoka frowns, before she takes a sip of her tea to wash it all down. Pulling her cup away, she looks over, "because it's chocolate?"

"Because it's a strange combination of sweet, and salty."

Madoka moves to take another bite, "really?" she says in between crunches, "I think it's a pretty good combination..."

Homura drains the rest of her tea. As she helps herself to another cupful, she glances over to Madoka, "I'll admit—it's not as bad as I thought it would be."

Madoka raises her head, "it should be higher then—"

"You rate everything higher than it should be."

Madoka places another chip in her mouth as a response.

Homura finishes the rest of her chips, and shakes her head when Madoka offers her more. "After you finish, we should head out—since we're walking, we'll probably get there around the same time Miki Sayaka arrives."

Madoka quickly checks the time; they're really cutting it close. She pours another handful into her palm, and murmurs a small thanks when Homura refills her cup.

As Madoka stuffs the rest of the chips into her mouth, Homura leans against the counter, drinking her second cup of tea. When she's half finished, she places her cup down. "Chocolate takoyaki—chocolate potato chips... please tell me this udon place does not have chocolate noodles or chocolate soup..."

Madoka takes a long sip of tea, before she turns to Homura with a grin.

They stare at one another for a few seconds, until Homura breaks eye-contact, pointing to the corner of her own mouth. "You have some chocolate there..."

"Ah," Madoka grabs a tissue from the nearby tissue box, and uses it to wipe her mouth. She looks at Homura for confirmation, who nods in response. "Thanks, Homura-chan."

"Sure. Should we head out now... before you finish that?"

Madoka sheepishly pulls her hand away from the open bag of chips. "Yeah—maybe we should."

They both finish their drinks, leaving the cups by the folded bag of chips as they both stand to their feet.

A quick bathroom break, and then they're out the door.

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Stifling a yawn, she peers out the window as the train slows down to a halt. A text from Mami had woken her from her nap earlier, and she had managed to doze in and out a bit before the approach to Tokyo.

She's eager to stretch out her legs, and as soon as the passengers around her stand to line up, she's grabbing her duffel bag from the top rack to join the waiting crowd.

When the doors slide open, they slowly pile out of the compartment, and as soon as she steps away from the train, the muggy humidity hits her all at once.

She makes a face. "Whew, it's hot here..." She frowns, walking forward to follow the other passengers further into the station.

As the crowd flows to the platform exit, she turns her head, eyes searching for that familiar shade of pink. There's a bit of nervouness when she doesn't see Madoka, but she brightens immediately when she spots her standing by one of the seats in the middle of the waiting area.

Madoka looks up a split second later, and as soon as their eyes meet, she waves her arm in Sayaka's direction.

Breaking out into a grin, Sayaka strides on over, weaving in between other passangers until she reaches Madoka's location.

After a brief hug, Madoka pulls back, giving Sayaka some room. "Sayaka-chan, how was the ride?"

"It was okay. Can't complain." She glances around curiously, "Homura's not here?"

"Homura-chan's in line—remember that udon place we ate at last week?"

"Mmhmm."

They both start moving towards the entrance to the indoor section of the station.

"I couldn't decide what to eat, and since Homura hasn't tried it yet..." She glances to Sayaka, "I hope that's okay?"

Sayaka shrugs. "I guess it's better than eating ramen in this weather..."

"They have soba too, you know," Madoka tells her. "Anyways, there was a really long line when we arrived. Homura-chan suggested she stand in line while I go pick you up—and depending on how far she gets, she'll either order to go, or we can eat there if we get back in time."

"Ahh, I see. Sounds like a good plan."

Walking forward, Madoka glances at Sayaka out of the corner of her eye. "Are you ready for your tournament?"

Sayaka gives her a thumbs up. "As ready as I'll ever be. I didn't get to practice as much as I wanted to, but I think I'll at least be able to go toe to toe with the Crimson Devil." She punches a fist into her open palm, "just you wait, Crimson Devil! I'll make you eat your words!"

"...You remembered to bring your books too, right?" The automatic doors slide open, and they follow the other visitors through the doorway.

Sayaka pats the duffel at her side. "Yup, it's all in here."

Madoka nods in approval. "Good."

They turn right, and as they walk further away from the doors, the temperature finally drops as the air conditioning kicks in.

Sayaka sighs in relief. "Much better in here."

Madoka nods, now absently chewing on her lower lip as she suddenly remembers Hitomi's conversation. It's one thing to keep from spilling the news over the phone with Sayaka, but now that she's here, face to face, the temptation to tell her is just a breath away.

"So."

Madoka jumps, startled from her thoughts as Sayaka throws a heavy arm around her shoulders.

"Anything new?"

Madoka blinks. "New?"

"Oh, you know," Sayaka pulls her in closer, expression devious as she whispers conspiracally, "between you and Homu-chan?"

It's the rare instance when Madoka can see the bait right in front of her; she quickly steers the conversation away, "actually, I spoke with Hitomi-chan the other day..."

"Really?" Sayaka straightens her posture, curious, "what's she up to lately?"

Madoka leads them down the pathway towards the food court, "she's coming home soon during summer break."

"Oh?"

Despite the casual tone, Sayaka's voice wavers ever so slightly—that small indication that the relationship between her and Hitomi had never quite recovered, even if they both would never admit it.

"She's going to come visit Tokyo. You're invited too, of course, Sayaka-chan. We were thinking of hosting a sleepover here, just like old times."

Sayaka nods, "sure, just tell me when and we'll work something out."

Madoka smiles.

Sayaka gives her a side glance, "though, I'm surprised Homura agreed."

Madoka's smile turns sheepish.

"You didn't tell her yet, did you?"

"W-Well..."

As Sayaka grins wider, Madoka frowns, immediately pointing a finger at Sayaka.

"Don't you dare tell her, Sayaka-chan. Because it's coming from you, she'll definitely turn down the invitation."

"It's not even her apartment—"

"It's not mine either—"

"Your mom—"

"Homura-chan lives there too."

Sayaka sighs heavily, "you've really gotta stop stepping on eggshells around her—she's a big girl, she can handle a few guests."

"Not a word," Madoka tells her in warning.

"Fine," Sayaka grumbles.

Madoka pulls away from Sayaka, leading the way towards the udon shop a few stores down. True to her words, there's a line winding outside. They scan the crowd, but Homura is nowhere to be seen.

"She's probably inside," Madoka murmurs. "I'll go check to see how far she is."

"Sure," Sayaka agrees, already searching for a place to stand and wait.

Just before Madoka starts walking towards the door, it swings open, and a second later, out steps Homura with two plastic bags in her hands.

As the door closes with a small jangle of chimes behind her, she looks up just as Madoka joins her side.

They exchange a few words, and the crowd is loud enough that Sayaka can only hear bits and pieces. When they share a smile, Sayaka swallows down her jealousy as she steps closer.

"...You stopped replying, so I just ordered it to go," Homura explains, acknowledging Sayaka with a brief glance.

Sayaka raises an eyebrow, annoyed at Homura's lukewarm reception.

Madoka reaches for one of the bags, "let me take one, Homura-chan."

The look Madoka gives her stops her protest, and Homura obediently hands one over. "Thank you."

Feeling ignored, Sayaka steps forward, arms suddenly held out. "Homu-chan! I knew you cared about me!"

A narrowed gaze slides to Sayaka's direction, Homura's eyes moving from side to side as she evaluates Sayaka's pose.

Sensing danger, Homura reaches out, pulling Madoka closer to act as a barrier between her and Sayaka. "We should get going." She starts walking, brushing her hair back.

Madoka looks at Sayaka, before she follows after Homura. "Since we're eating at home we can add some more vegetables to the soup."

Hands now on her hips, Sakaya frowns at their backs. "You're going to ignore me?"

Madoka glances over her shoulder, "Sayaka-chan, let's hurry back."

Grumbling, Sayaka kicks at the floor. "Yeah, yeah. You two sure know how to make someone feel welcome."

"You're welcomed to lea—"

Madoka grabs Homura's arm, "Homura-chan."

Homura sighs. She turns back to Sayaka, "...you can have an extra tempura."

Sayaka jogs forward to catch up to them, "what makes you think a tempura will make me forgive you?"

"I don't really care—"

Madoka tightens her fingers around Homura's arm, cutting her off. "Let's hurry back—I'm starting to get hungry."

Sayaka and Homura exchange a look.

"...What else you have to offer?"

"Soft boiled egg?"

Sayaka rubs her chin, "hmmm."

"It's Madoka's."

"Hey!"

Sayaka snaps a finger in her direction. "Deal!"

Madoka whirls around, pouting, "Sayaka-chan!"

Grinning, Sayaka gives Madoka a wink. "If you win me at a race I'll think about sharing one with you, Madoka." She shoots forward, using her longer legs to her advantage.

Homura immediately slows down, and they both watch as Sayaka dodges around the crowd as she makes her way through the station.

"...Does she know we're walking back?" Homura asks.

Madoka hums. "...Maybe?"

"She'll figure it out once she sees the buses."

"Probably..."

Neither of them move any faster as Sayaka slowly gains distance between them.

A peek of lavender makes Madoka turn to Homura in curiosity.

"I'll give you half of mine," Homura volunteers.

Madoka punches her arm, "if you hadn't offered mine in the first place..."

Homura rubs the offending spot, wisely keeping her comment to herself. She clears her throat, "we should probably get going. I don't see Miki Sayaka anywhere anymore."

Madoka tries to peer past the crowd; she frowns when she realizes they have completely lost sight of Sayaka.

"Right, let me send her a message real quick, just in case..."

It's when they exit the station, and are close to passing a particular shop when they spot a familiar figure standing on the curb of the sidewalk, her bright neon shoelaces acting as a beacon before they are even close enough to recognize her face.

She's busy browsing her phone, and doesn't notice when Madoka and Homura step closer.

"Sayaka-chan."

"There you two are." She stuffs her phone into her pocket, and finally looks up with an exasperated sigh. "Listen, I know you are used to flirting with each other twenty four seven, but could you at least hold yourself back when you have guests?"

Madoka pauses, before she reaches into her bag to pull out Homura's umbrella. She hands it over to Homura, and then detaches herself from Homura's side.

"That's right," Madoka says as she approaches Sayaka, "my best friend is visiting, so I should pay attention to you."

"Yea—"

Smiling, Madoka reaches for Sayaka's arm. She grabs it, and presses her fingers down, hard. "Sayaka-chan, let's walk together."

"Ow—ow, Madoka—that hurts—"

Still smiling, Madoka tugs Sayaka forward, forcing her to start walking.

"Madoka—my arm—"

Grudgingly, Madoka relaxes her hand. Sayaka sighs in relief, rubbing her arm to coax the pain away.

The silence is brief however, and when they're away from the busier streets near the station, Madoka lets go of Sayaka's arm.

"Sayaka-chan."

"Hmm?"

"What's up?"

Sayaka blinks. "...Well, it's pretty hot here, isn't it?" She asks as she rolls up her sleeves. "Maybe I should've tried arriving last night if I knew we'd be walking..." She glances over her shoulder to Homura, who's half hidden in the shadows of her umbrella, "why does Homura get the umbrella anyways? Aren't I the guest here?"

"You're fine, Sayaka-chan," Madoka says as she pulls Sayaka's attention back. "We don't live that far from the station."

"But—"

"Sayaka-chan, you wanted to talk, didn't you?"

"Er..." Sayaka scratches her head sheepishly. "Nah, I was just saying that to tease you two. There's nothing I have—"

"Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka drops her arm to her side, slouching. "...You could tell?"

Madoka readjusts the bag in her hand. "Somehow or other."

Sayaka remains quiet as she organizes her thoughts. Distracted, she watches as an illusion of glistening water flickers in the street. When a drop of sweat rolls down her chin, she sneaks a jealous glance over her shoulder to Homura and her umbrella.

"That's just the scenery, Sayaka-chan."

"Eh?" Sayaka turns to Madoka, confused.

"Scenery that won't tell anyone—since scenery can't talk."

Sayaka blinks, before turning to point at Homura. "Scenery?"

Madoka nods, watching as Homura brushes her hair back. "Pretty scenery—"

"Hey—"

Madoka coughs, and faces forward. "So—what's up? Is there something on your mind? We have some time before we get back."

"Scenery, huh?" Sayaka murmurs. She glances around, "you know, I always thought Tokyo would be a lot more... different? But it's... pretty similar to Mitakihara."

Madoka nods, letting Sayaka lead the conversation. "I thought the same when I first came here, but there's some differences between here and there besides the weather." She points to one of the nearby shops: a small snack shop lined with colourful displays of old-fashioned snacks. "It's harder to find these kinds of stores back home—especially since they've started that restoration project; I don't recall ever seeing a chalkboard menu there either..."

Sayaka holds out her hand, ticking off an invisible list with her fingers, "game centers, shopping malls, amusement parks... we have the same kind stuff too."

"It's more like what they don't have in common that makes it interesting here. The other day—" Madoka blinks, head turning when Sayaka stops walking. "Sayaka-chan?"

"...It's not that different here, is it?"

"...It's not."

"...Remember, what I said last week, about moving to Tokyo—"

"Wha—"

They both turn, finding Homura frowning at the street as she tries to pretend she hadn't just shouted a few seconds ago.

They turn back to face each other. Sayaka takes a deep breath, and then slowly exhales. "What if—I moved to Tokyo?"

Madoka searches Sayaka's face. "...What about school?"

Sayaka glances away, "I was—thinking about dropping out—"

"I won't let you if it's because you think it's too difficult."

Sayaka's turns back, now frowning, "what—"

"'If, after a year, you still hate it there, only then will I let you come back.'"

Sayaka blinks. "That—"

Madoka smiles as she looks over to where Homura is patiently waiting as they talk. She focuses back on Sayaka, "you told me that after I had arrived in Tokyo. I had said that I wanted to go back home, but I'm glad I listened to you and I stayed."

Sayaka's hand grips her duffel, wrinkling cloth under her fingers, "that's—different. I-It's almost been a year—but I feel like I haven't done anything—"

"And you think there's something in Tokyo?"

Sayaka closes her mouth, gritting her teeth in annoyance. "Something—anything—has to be better than home. I feel like I can't breathe there. I can see why you had left."

Madoka steps back suddenly. She turns around, and then starts walking, pace slow as an indicator for Sayaka to follow after her. A few wide strides later, Sayaka catches up, and they're walking side by side. The familiarity of Sayaka's presence reminds Madoka of middle school; walking together with Sayaka and Hitomi as they head to class.

They turn down the next corner.

"Where will you stay?" Madoka asks after another moment.

Sayaka gives Madoka an unsure smile, "w-well, I mean, I was hoping I could stay with you and Homura? You—said I was welcomed here, didn't you?"

Madoka stares straight ahead, "...of course I'd let you stay, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka sighs in relief. For a second, she had been sure Madoka was going to turn her down.

"...Do you know why I decided to go to a school in Tokyo?" Madoka murmurs.

Sayaka blinks. "I—always thought because it was the best...?"

Madoka absently readjusts the bag in her hand. She gives a not so subtle glance over her shoulder, and finding Homura still following, focuses in front of her. "Mitakihara has a pretty good medical program actually; it's newer than the schools here of course, but residency is easier after graduation because the market in Mitakihara isn't as saturated."

Sayaka tilts her head, "then?"

"The schools here are good," Madoka agrees, "but other universities are gaining foot. I could have saved money staying at home, and Papa would've been more than happy to continue to pack a lunch for me everyday. Mama wouldn't have had

to worry about getting an apartment, and I could have been there to help Takkun with his situation at school." Rose pink flickers to Sayaka's direction, catching her gaze, "I didn't leave to get away from home."

Sayaka swallows hard. That look in Madoka's eyes reminds her of an older Kaname; somehow, in the time that they've been apart, baby-faced Madoka had grown up more than she thought.

Jealousy churns in her stomach. "Then... why?"

Madoka turns, giving her a small smile. She holds up the bag in her hand, "we should hurry back."

Faltering at the sudden change of subject, Sayaka nods. "Er, yeah."

They continue walking in silence, Madoka walking slightly ahead as they navigate their way towards the apartment. They're a good two blocks away when Madoka turns to Sayaka.

"I won't let you stay here though, unless you have a plan."

"A plan?"

"A job. School. Internship. Something. A reason for coming to Tokyo."

"Getting far away from my nagging parents isn't a good enough reason?" Sayaka jokes.

Madoka continues moving, responding to Sayaka's words with a brief glance. "Think about it, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka sighs, "yeah—I will."

Madoka nods in approval. "Good." She glances behind them again, absently chewing her lip in worry—she'll have to make it up to Homura, and convince her to stay—which she hopes won't be too hard.

For the time being though, she'll wait until Sayaka is gone to talk to her.

Madoka focuses back to Sayaka. "What time are you meeting Kyouko-chan, Sayaka-chan?"

"Hmmm." Sayaka shrugs. "A couple hours before the competition starts? Kyouko wanted to discuss strategies or something." She shakes her head. "You know, she was actually sending me tips and stuff this whole week."

The air around them changes, and they both visibly relax.

"She does seem really serious about it," Madoka comments, remembering Kyouko's reaction to Sayaka's possible absence.

"Er..." Sayaka scratches her cheek absently. "That's—probably because the pot is actually three million yen..."

"Ehh, is that so?" Madoka replies. "Three million huh...?" She repeats the amount in her head, and suddenly stops in her tracks, turning to Sayaka in surprise. "Three million?!"

Sayaka points at Madoka, grinning at her response. "Slow."

Madoka catches herself, blushing. She does a quick check of their surroundings, before lowering her voice. "T-Three million? For—dancing?"

"First place that is." Sayaka sighs wistfully. "Who knew there was such potential under my nose? If I had known..." She shakes her head, "it seems like Kyouko's been doing this for a while. If I had that much money I wouldn't have to worry about going to school, at least for a little while...I wonder what she does with all her money...?"

They pause as they remember her appetite.

"Food...?" Madoka says.

"With how much she eats..." Sayaka agrees. "I wonder if she goes to food eating competitions too?"

"Speaking of food..."

With a loud shout, Madoka and Sayaka both jump in surprise.

Homura walks past them, eyes briefly flickering in their direction, before she continues forward. "Those are some good expressions. I'll head up first, and you can join me once you're done chatting."

They both watch as she takes point, and after a moment, they slowly start following Homura as she continues to the apartment.

"Madoka..."

"Yes, Sayaka-chan?"

"If I move to Tokyo..."

"Uh huh."

"Will she..."

"Homura-chan's part of the set, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka sighs deeply, head bowed and shoulders slouching. "Thought so." She lifts her head, turning to Madoka with a serious expression. "Madoka."

"Yes, Sayaka-chan?"

"I'm your best friend, right?"

"You are, Sayaka-chan."

"Then—"

Madoka suddenly holds up her hand at eye-level. "Since you're my best friend, Sayaka-chan, you're here."

Sayaka grins, straightening up. "Then—"

Madoka raises her arm higher, "Homura-chan is here."

"She's higher than me?!"

Madoks smiles. "Of course."

"That's cold, Madoka." Sayaka covers her eyes with her arm, "to think, my wife has grown so distant. What went wrong? How did our relationship turn out this way? How—"

"Sayaka-chan, if you don't hurry up I'm going to leave you behind."

Sayaka quickly lifts her head, only to find Madoka no longer next to her, but already walking away. She starts a light jog to catch up.

"You're so cold, Madoka!"

"It's summer, Sayaka-chan."

"So cold!"

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"...How is it, Homura-chan?"

"Mm..." Homura glances down to her bowl of udon, topped with their added dressings of boiled vegetables and fish cake. Half her tempura is gone, and she had split her egg with Madoka. They are currently working their way through their order of udon, with a small bowl of soba evenly split between the three of them to complete their meal. "...I can't tell if it's good, or if I'm just hungry."

Sayaka finishes her mouthful of soup, before turning to Homura with a shake of her head. "That's because you're spoiled!"

Homura's eyes narrow slightly, already anticipating Sayaka's next comment. She takes a bite of her noodles to keep her insult from spilling out.

Chopsticks halfway to her mouth, Madoka lifts her head to glance at Sayaka, "spoiled?"

Sayaka waggles a finger in her direction, "and whose fault do you think it is?"

Madoka blinks in confusion. "What are you talking about, Sayaka-chan?"

Sayaka sighs, eyes closing as a dramatic effect. "Think about it, Madoka. Of course there's no way this udon would be good to Homura. Not when she eats food made by you."

"Eh?"

Sayaka leans over, grinning at Homura mischievously, "isn't that right, Homura?" When she doesn't reply, Sayaka sighs, turning back to her food. She scoops up a few noodles with her chopsticks, "compared to Madoka's cooking, this udon is merely average." Sayaka slides her gaze to Madoka, expression turning sly.

Half between embarrassment and curiosity, Madoka makes a mental note to make this up to Sayaka later. She sneaks a glance to Homura, and then turns back to her noodles, trying to appear nonchalant. "Well, I haven't really made fresh udon before, so it's not like Homura-chan has anything she can compare with..."

"Hmm..."

Sayaka and Madoka both wait for Homura's response as she takes another bite of her lunch.

As the seconds tick by, Sayaka impatiently makes a circular motion with her hands, trying to hurry Homura up. "Well? Well?"

Rose pink flickers to Sayaka's direction. "Sayaka-chan—"

"For once, Miki Sayaka may be right."

Sayaka points at Madoka, grinning. "See!" Her smug expression turns into a frown when she realizes what Homura has said. "Hey!"

"Even if Madoka has never made udon, she has made plenty of soups. This broth is too thin." She glances down to her bowl, "plus the fact that we needed to add our own sides to balance the meal—yes, I agree I'd rather eat something Madoka has made."

Madoka blushes, but when she remembers Sayaka is also there, she turns to her bowl, and quickly takes a bite of some vegetables to refrain from embarassing herself.

Sayaka places a hand to her head, "ugh, I know I'm the one that had started it, but listening to you lovebirds is bad for my health." She glares at Homura, and suddenly slams a hand onto the breakfast bar, catching the other two off-guard.

"Sayaka-chan?"

Sayaka smirks, lifting her chin slightly as she stares down at Homura. "Your Madoka usurping days are over though once I move here!" She points her thumb at herself, "I'll be there to eat Madoka's food, and appreciate it more than you ever could!"

Madoka blinks, while Homura turns back to her udon.

After a moment, Madoka does the same.

Floundering, Sayaka waves her arms. "Hey, don't ignore me!"

"...minus the fact that I'm surprised you used that word correctly—"

"Hey—"

"—if you're so set on moving to Tokyo, does that mean I don't have to tutor you in math anymore?"

Sayaka deflates almost immediately. "...You really know how to bring a person down, you know that?"

Homura glances over. "It's a gift..."

Sayaka sighs, pushing away her bowl of noodles to make room. With her arms placed in front of her, she proceeds to bury her face into them. "I mean, it's not like I'm not not going to try..." she mumbles to herself.

Madoka frowns at Homura, who gives her a shrug in response.

"I never said I wouldn't tutor you," Homura says with a sigh. She waits until Sayaka lifts her head to continue, "but only if you're serious about trying to pass. There's no point in wasting both our time if you're going into this half-heartedly."

Sayaka rolls her head from side to side, eyebrows furrowed as she mulls it over. Her eyes snap open, and she suddenly sits up, arm extended as she points at Homura. "You think I can't pass my math class, don't you!"

Homura sips her soup, unconsciously comparing it to the ones Madoka has made; maybe she really is spoiled. She pushes that thought away, turning to Sayaka and her outstretched hand with an exasperated look.

"Aren't you the one who thinks you can't pass? You asked me to help you, did you not?"

Sayaka slowly withdraws her hand. Without responding, she pulls her bowl of noodles close. She reaches for her chopsticks, eyes staring hard into her soup. "...I'm telling you this right now, but I'm going to pass my math class. I'm still not sure if I'm moving to Tokyo, but whether or not I move, I'm going to pass my math class for sure!" She dives into her meal, this time eating with much more gusto.

Madoka and Homura exchange another look. Madoka gives Homura a small smile, in which Homura responds by rolling her eyes. The conversation lulls, and they both turn back to finish their meal.

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One by one, they set their chopsticks down. When Madoka and Homura both move to start cleaning up, it takes a moment until Sayaka catches on, and she scrambles out of her seat to help them.

They're in the midst of rinsing their dishes when an unfamiliar ringtone starts playing.

"Ah," Sayaka cranes her neck, using the added height to peer at the lit screen of her phone. "Ahhhh crap, it's Kyouko," she says as she tries to quickly rinse off her soaped hands. After a few passes in the water, she shuts off the faucet, and then hurriedly flicks her hands dry.

Homura frowns and Madoka jumps at the unexpected drops of water flung in their directions.

Sayaka barrels past them, wiping her hands dry on her jeans as she hurries to pick up her phone.

"Don't hang up, don't hang up—" the sound cuts off as Sayaka places her phone by her ear. "Hey—" Her face drops into a frown, body straightening to whatever Kyouko is telling her on the line. "You said you wanted to meet at three, didn't you?"

Both Madoka and Homura have stopped moving, the former in curiosity, and the latter as she waits for their makeshift assembly line to continue.

Sayaka blinks. She turns her head, eyes seeking the clock she knows Madoka has set up in the kitchen, and freezes when she realizes it's way past the meeting time.

"Whoa, I didn't realize it was so late—sorry about that," she sheepishly rubs the back of her head. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Kyouko responds, somewhat placated, and with a sigh of relief, Sayaka hangs up.

"Is everything okay, Sayaka-chan?"

Sayaka turns to Madoka, and they both pretend as if Madoka hadn't been eavesdropping.

"Er... yeah, I was supposed to meet Kyouko at three, but I guess I was having too much fun talking with you two that I forgot." She stares at the half finished dishes in the sink, "I'll finish helping, and then I'll head on out—"

Madoka shakes her head. "That's okay, Sayaka-chan. Homura-chan and I can handle this. Why don't you go meet Kyouko-chan now? You still need to practice a bit before the competition, right?"

Sayaka is halfway to smiling, before she catches herself, and quickly glances at Homura.

Homura ignores her; she has now moved, occupying the empty spot that Sayaka had vacated moments prior. Madoka hands Homura a soapy plate, and she proceeds to start rinsing it off.

"Er..." Sayaka scratches her head, "you think you'll be okay without me here to help you, Homura?"

Not looking up from her task, Homura's voice is deadpan, "somehow, I think we'll manage, almost as if you weren't here and we're used to doing this without you."

Sayaka rolls her eyes as Homura easily squashes her guilt with her way with words. "You're meeting us for dinner later, right, Madoka?"

Madoka nods, glancing over briefly, before handing off another bowl to Homura, "yup, just text or call when you're done so I know when to leave. Do you know where you're meeting Kyouko-chan at?"

Sayaka holds up her phone, giving Madoka a wink, "not to worry, she gave me her address earlier and I've already entered it into the GPS; pretty straight forward."

"Okay, but if you get lost, call me. It's still bright out so I'm not too worried, but just in case..."

Unconsciously, they both look to Homura who once again ignores them.

Sayaka turns back to Madoka, giving her a salute, "aye aye, sir! I'll see you later. Thanks—for picking me up, and for lunch."

"Lunch wasn't free," Homura tells her, still not looking up.

"Put it on my tab," Sayaka responds easily as she pockets her phone. "I'll let myself out—don't miss me too much."

Only Madoka acknowledges her with a small smile, and Sayaka stomps away, footsteps softening as wood flooring transitions into carpet. She takes a small detour to the bathroom, before she heads out, locking the door behind her.

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It isn't too long until Homura shuts off the water as Madoka places the last bowl onto the drying rack.

It's quiet in the kitchen, and there are no sounds coming from the living room; it's just the two of them, as usual.

Madoka glances to Homura, suddenly feeling nervous. "Guess..." Homura looks over, "er... so Sayaka-chan might end up moving to Tokyo after all..."

"Hmm..."

Madoka wrings the cloth in her hands in worry, "you're not mad, are you?"

Homura finishes wiping her hands, and sets the towel aside. She starts walking over to the breakfast bar. "Why would I be mad?"

Becoming increasingly anxious, Madoka abandons the cloth nearby to follow after her. "...Because I agreed to letting her stay here without asking you first."

Homura shrugs, reaching her usual seat, and the reason why she had walked over in the first place. "It's fine. This isn't my apartment." She grabs her cup, glancing inside to confirm it's still full, before she takes a long sip of her water.

"...But you live here, and you have a say, too."

The cup is lowered, and Homura glances at Madoka. After another moment, she moves again, this time walking over to the living room. Hot on her heels, Madoka trails her.

"It's fine," Homura tells her as she takes a seat on the couch.

Tentatively, Madoka sits down next to her, watching as Homura pulls her phone from her jacket pocket. "Are you sure...?"

Homura hums in agreement, thumb moving as she starts browsing her phone.

With a sigh, Madoka sinks into the couch cushions. She's tempted to change into her jersey, but Her curiosity slowly gets the best of her as Homura keeps her full attention on her phone.

She scoots over, molding her body against Homura's to rest her head against shoulder. "...What're you looking at?"

"Mm, nothing really," Homura murmurs, swiping at the screen.

Before she can stop herself, Madoka looks over, hoping for a glimpse of whatever has caught Homura's attention. Her stomach drops when she realizes Homura is looking at the housing section on their school website.

She grabs Homura's arm, drawing her attention. "You're looking at classifieds?" The hurt in her voice stops Homura from her browsing.

"...Just in case."

"It won't be that bad—you've had worse."

"True..."

"And—" Madoka hates herself just a little for pointing this out, but the thought of Homura leaving would make her hate herself even more, "I don't think you'd be able to find a place cheaper than here..."

Homura blinks. Her lips dip into a subtle frown. "True..."

Madoka wraps her arms around Homura's arm, offering her a wordless apology as she leans against her. "It's not guaranteed Sayaka-chan will move here, anyways."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Madoka sighs. "Sayaka-chan really isn't that bad, Homura-chan. Do you really dislike her that much?"

Homura half shrugs, shifting both their bodies, before settling back down. "I've—known worse. I couldn't pinpoint why I didn't really like her when we first met, but I realize it's because she reminds me of Satoshi."

They're both lost in their thoughts as his name stirs up memories of earlier this week.

Homura slowly relaxes, and lowers her phone to her lap. "I'll think about it," she murmurs.

Madoka smiles to herself, snuggling closer against Homura. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

"Mmhmm..."

Stomach full, and suddenly feeling sleepy, Madoka closes her eyes, breathing in that subtle smell of strawberry shampoo, mixed with the sunscreen that's still sticking to Homura's skin.

"...Did you want to study?" Homura's voice is soft, barely registering against her sleepy haze.

"Mmm..." Her arms loop around Homura's waist. "Maybe..." she breathes out, eyes still closed. "You can study first, Homura-chan..."

Homura responds with a comment, but Madoka can't hear as she's already falling asleep. Once she realizes that Madoka won't be letting go of her anytime soon, Homura leans back into the couch, and carefully unlocks her phone.

She had wanted to get changed, but she'll do so when the baby koala wakes. She stares at the tab of listings, and remembering Madoka's reaction, closes the windo**w.**

AN: It's been a while... just a little... hope whoever's still here has been doing well. The few remnants, thank you for reading/reviewing. MDHMmmmmm